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### The Thawing of a Frozen Conflict: The Internal Security Dilemma and the 2004 Prelude to the Russo-Georgian War

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# The Thawing of a Frozen Conflict: The Internal Security Dilemma and the 2004 Prelude to the Russo-Georgian War

CORY WELT

## *Abstract*

While the proximate causes of the 2008 Russo–Georgian war have yet to be satisfactorily investigated, an assessment of an earlier occasion of conflict in South Ossetia in 2004 can lay the groundwork for an analysis of the later war. Like the 2008 war, the 2004 conflict was comprehensible on the basis of the ambitious war plans of opposing sides, but it was ultimately rooted in a security dilemma. The conflict thus provides a precedent for considering how a mix of limited offensive intentions, insecurity, uncertainty, and cognitive shortcuts and misperceptions had the capacity to lead to inadvertent war between Russia and Georgia over South Ossetia.

THE AUGUST 2008 WAR BETWEEN RUSSIA AND GEORGIA is commonly said to have begun with a Georgian offensive on Tskhinvali, the administrative centre of the breakaway region of South Ossetia, as well as on Russian troops that crossed into South Ossetia, a *de facto* Russian protectorate, around the time of the Georgian operation.<sup>1</sup> The offensive resulted in a Russian counterattack to drive Georgia out of

I acknowledge with gratitude and admiration Theresa Freese, whose groundbreaking field reporting on the Georgian–South Ossetian conflict of 2004 greatly inspired and informed this article. I would also like to thank intern James Kelly at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and graduate students Binio Binev, Dan Zuckerman and Pavle Milekic at Georgetown University for exemplary research assistance. I gratefully acknowledge the prior support of the US Institute of Peace for the research and writing of this article, as well as the institutional support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

<sup>1</sup>The sequence or at least significance of troop movements on 7 August and earlier remains in dispute. The Georgian government asserts, on the basis of intelligence and several post-war Russian media reports, that several groupings of Russian armed forces crossed into South Ossetia on and before 7 August, prior to the Georgian offensive on Tskhinvali. Even the *de facto* President of Abkhazia, Sergey Bagapsh, said on 7 August that a Russian military battalion was in Tskhinvali. The Russian government says that Russian forces moved into South Ossetia only after Georgia launched its late-night offensive, though officials do not deny the prior transit of armed ‘volunteers’ or ‘rotations’ of peacekeeping forces. For initial statements of the Georgian position, see ‘Statement of the Government of Georgia Regarding the Situation in the South Ossetia Region of Georgia’, 8 August 2008, available at: [http://www.government.gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=103&info\\_id=1982](http://www.government.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=103&info_id=1982); and

Tskhinvali and, indeed, all South Ossetia (of which Georgia controlled a substantial portion before the war); ethnic cleansing of some 20,000 Georgians (who made up about a third of the region's pre-war population); air, land and sea attacks much further into Georgia; the loss of a remote but strategic territory in Georgia's second breakaway region of Abkhazia; and, finally, Russian military occupation of both regions and unilateral recognition of their independence.

That the 'Tskhinvali offensive' resulted in such high losses for Georgia suggests, to some, a cautionary tale regarding the unintended consequences of an overly ambitious Georgian war of choice. Another, perhaps more prominent, interpretation of the war is that Russia, in collaboration with its South Ossetian client, subversively launched its own war of choice to secure control over the breakaway region. However, these are not the only possibilities. The war may not have been driven directly by Russian or Georgian ambitions at all, but instead triggered inadvertently by a security dilemma.

Further research is required to uncover satisfactorily the proximate causes of the August 2008 war. However, an analysis of an earlier occasion of conflict in South Ossetia four years before can lay the groundwork. In a causal sense, the low-level but lethal conflict of 2004 established the military-strategic environment which facilitated a rapid escalation to war in August 2008. More importantly, the 2004 conflict was also comprehensible on the basis of the ambitious war plans of either side, but it was ultimately rooted in a security dilemma. The conflict thus provides a precedent for how a mix of limited offensive intentions, insecurity (and other motivations), uncertainty, and cognitive shortcuts and misperceptions had the capacity to lead to inadvertent war between Russia and Georgia over South Ossetia.

This article has two main sections. The first explains how and why armed conflict arose within South Ossetia in 2004. Observers can easily misconstrue the origins of a security-dilemma conflict such as this, for security dilemmas emerge out of a variety of intentions and motivations: defensive insecurity, offensive insecurity, and even offensive ambition. The origins of a security-dilemma conflict have to be empirically investigated, not assumed. This, however, is an uncertain enterprise, thanks not only to the difficulties of gathering and assessing evidence, but also to the more abstract challenge of how to define motivations and distinguish among multiple ones. As this section discusses, this is particularly true in analyses of internal conflict.

The trigger to the 2004 conflict is not in dispute: it was new restrictions on trade and movement that Georgia imposed in and around South Ossetia. The question is why

'Russian Invasion of Georgia: Media and Telephone Intercepts Confirm Russia Started the War', Georgia Update, Government of Georgia, 20 September 2008, available at: <http://georgiaupdate.gov.ge/en/doc/10006597/Evidence%20Russia%20started%202008.09.20.pdf>. For Bagapsh's statement, see *Rossiia TV* (Moscow), 7 August 2008, translated in *BBC Monitoring*, available via: <http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/lnacademic>. For initial Russian responses to Georgian claims, see Chivers (2008) and 'Kremlin Releases Their Version of Events in Georgia', *Washington Times POTUS Notes*, 19 August 2008, available at: <http://www3.washingtontimes.com/weblogs/potus-notes/2008/aug/19/kremlin-releases-their-version-events-georgia/>; all sites accessed September 2008. On the build up to the war, also see the extensive collection of documents and materials available at: <http://georgiaupdate.gov.ge/en/backgrounders>, accessed June 2009, and also Allison (2008) and Cornell and Starr (2009). This article was completed before the September 2009 release of the Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, established by the Council of the European Union (<http://www.ceiiig.ch/Report.html>). The contents of the Report do not alter the article's conclusions.

Georgia imposed these restrictions. While different combinations of intentions (defensive or offensive) and motivations (insecurity or ambition) are plausible, in reality it was Georgia's limited offensive intentions and, probably, its mixed motivations of insecurity and ambition that triggered the conflict. Georgia was not a purely defensive security-seeker, but neither did it launch a reckless war of ambition. It was seeking nonviolent regime change in South Ossetia and, by extension, a resolution of the long-standing conflict. The escalation that resulted from this effort to change the status quo was undesired and unexpected and it was propelled by a security dilemma.

The second section investigates the mechanics of this security dilemma. Heightened structural uncertainties and vulnerabilities make the likelihood of security-dilemma escalation greater in an intra-state setting (with weakened central authority) than in an inter-state setting. At the same time, the interaction between internal uncertainties and vulnerabilities and more traditional external threats also increases the likelihood of escalation. Even then, however, structural conditions may not be sufficient to trigger conflict; rather, they establish a context in which actors form mistaken presumptions about other actors' intentions, exaggerate threats, and mistakenly signal intentions they do not possess. Misperception, distortion, and blunders directly precipitate security-dilemma escalation. Structural conditions provide a permissive environment for these processes to occur while driving escalation more 'automatically' in their wake.

These propositions emerge out of an analysis of the escalation that occurred in South Ossetia in 2004. At first glance, the conflict represents a mechanical case of security-dilemma escalation. Georgian restrictions threatened South Ossetians and led to countermeasures by both Ossetians and Russia, their patron, to defend territorial and administrative control and local freedom of movement and, ultimately, to deter a potential Georgian military offensive. Georgians viewed these countermeasures as threatening to local Georgian populations and to their control of territory within the breakaway region. They thus felt compelled to take defensive and deterrent measures which, in turn, threatened Ossetians even more. This spiral led the parties to the brink of unwanted war.

Still, escalation did not occur automatically. The real trigger was a specific (Georgian) action and the cognitive misperceptions that flowed from that action or minimised its impact. At the start of the conflict, Georgia made a move only tangentially related to its objective of restricting trade and movement in and around South Ossetia: the rapid deployment of several hundred special forces troops into the so-called conflict zone, an area with a 15-kilometre radius defined in a 1992 ceasefire agreement and centred on Tskhinvali. This action—not Georgia's general restrictions on trade and movement—triggered Ossetian and Russian countermeasures and increased suspicions that Georgia was preparing a military offensive against South Ossetia. Consistent with the cognitive 'shortcuts' individuals are said to take under conditions of uncertainty, the South Ossetian and Russian leaderships inferred far greater offensive intentions from this action than Georgians actually possessed. Likewise, Georgians were hard pressed to perceive Ossetian and Russian countermeasures as genuinely defensive reactions to an action they knew did not signal offensive intent. A cycle of insecurity-driven escalation resulted.

The conflict of 2004 raised the spectre of inadvertent war in South Ossetia and laid the groundwork for it to break out at a later date. It demonstrated that conflict in South

Ossetia could arise not because Russia or Georgia were seeking war but because of limited offensive intentions, insecurity and other motivations, uncertainty, and cognitive shortcuts and misperceptions—in short, a security dilemma. Establishing the role of a security dilemma in the 2004 conflict does not establish that a similar causal process led to the August 2008 war, but, as I argue in the final section, it provides a compelling avenue for investigation.

*Why conflict? Disentangling Georgian motivations and intentions*

*Triggering a security dilemma: a typology of motivations and intentions*

Typically invoked to explain inadvertent wars, or the road to such wars, the ‘security dilemma’ traditionally has had two different, albeit overlapping, definitions. The first centres on the effect of one actor’s actions on another, the dilemma being that ‘many of the means by which [an actor] tries to increase its security decrease the security of others’ (Jervis 1978, p. 169). The second focuses on the impact of an actor’s actions on itself: ‘what one does to enhance one’s own security causes reactions that, in the end, can make one less secure’ (Posen 1993, p. 28).<sup>2</sup>

While either definition can be useful for explaining unwanted conflicts, the second provides greater analytical purchase in two ways. First, it more consistently retains the notion of inadvertency at the core of the security dilemma (Jervis 1976, p. 66; Posen 1991, p. 13) by focusing on the unintentional ‘blowback’ effect of one’s actions (whereas the first definition allows for either unintentional or intentional actions against another). The second definition also resolves a paradox in the treatment of security dilemmas, which are often said to arise from either security or ambition (often referred to as ‘predation’ or ‘greed’) (Snyder 1985, pp. 156, 165–66; Jervis 1993, p. 245; Glaser 1992, p. 505, 1997, pp. 190–91; Snyder & Jervis 1999, pp. 19–24). On the surface, this seems contradictory, as the security dilemma is supposed to explain outcomes produced by security-seeking behaviour. If conflict is regarded as an iterative process, however, the paradox disappears, as what an actor initially does to enhance its non-security goals can cause reactions that unexpectedly make it insecure.<sup>3</sup>

The problem with this nuance, of course, is that even if one observes a security dilemma in action, this reveals nothing about what triggered the security dilemma in the first place. As Paul Roe (2001, 2004) has usefully elaborated, at least three combinations of motivations and intentions can trigger security-dilemma escalation. The classic formulation stems from insecurity, which leads an actor to take defensive action that another actor fears signals (or might signal) offensive intent. An action–reaction cycle leading to higher levels of tension and possibly armed conflict follows, as the actors take increasingly risky or threatening measures to alleviate their mutually

<sup>2</sup>Jervis also utilised this second definition, noting that ‘[w]hen states seek the ability to defend themselves, they get too much and too little . . . too little because others, being menaced, will increase their own arms and so reduce the first state’s security’ (Jervis 1976, p. 64).

<sup>3</sup>Citing a preference for the second definition, Glaser (1997, p. 174) has also argued that the first is unsatisfactory since it ‘does not make clear why the security dilemma is a problem’: from an actor’s perspective, reducing another’s security to increase one’s own does not represent much of a dilemma.

rising insecurity (Herz 1950, p. 157; Butterfield 1951, pp. 19–21; Jervis 1976, pp. 68–75, 1978, pp. 181–82).<sup>4</sup>

Security-dilemma escalation does not only have its roots, or even its most common roots, in defensive security-seeking behaviour, however.<sup>5</sup> An actor may believe that its security ‘requires the insecurity of others’, so that it needs to take offensive action to be secure (Snyder 1985, p. 155).<sup>6</sup> Such action triggers a security dilemma when an actor mistakenly expects the action to increase its security without provoking an extended conflict.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, offensive action does not have to be security-driven initially for it to lead to a security dilemma. As mentioned, an ambitious (‘greedy’ or ‘predatory’) actor can also inadvertently end up in a security-reducing conflict that it did not expect.<sup>8</sup>

In sum, just because a security dilemma drives the escalation of a particular conflict does not mean that the conflict was, as the classical version of the security dilemma would have it, a ‘tragic’ clash of defensive insecurities (Roe 1999). Defensive security-seeking behaviour may have triggered the conflict, but so might offensive security-seeking behaviour or even offensive ambition.

#### *Defining and distinguishing among motivations and intentions in internal conflict*

While assessing the motivations and intentions that lead to a security dilemma is desirable, it can also be extremely difficult. In addition to problems of self-rationalisation and dissimulation, actors can have multiple motivations (Glaser 1992, pp. 505–06, 1997, p. 190; Snyder & Jervis 1999, pp. 19–20; Jervis 2001, pp. 37–38).<sup>9</sup> As for intentions, it is often as unclear to observers as to participants what an actor may be doing, let alone why. Difficulties arise in differentiating between

<sup>4</sup>For other elaborations of the classic formulation, see Snyder (1985, pp. 157, 161–64), Glaser (1992, pp. 182–83), Collins (2000) and Roe (2000, 2004, pp. 284–86), who refers to this as a ‘tight’ security dilemma.

<sup>5</sup>Roe (2000, p. 389) suggests that the conditions that frame the classic security dilemma are so restrictive that it is not so common in reality. Indeed, in Lebow’s classic study of crisis escalation (1981, pp. 23–24), only one of the 28 cases examined was arguably the product of a classic security dilemma (when ‘central decision-makers [perceived] that the provocation triggering the crisis [was] both undesired and unsanctioned by the central decision-makers of the adversary’).

<sup>6</sup>Jervis (2001, pp. 40–41, 53) refers to this as a deep security dilemma, while Roe calls it a ‘regular’ security dilemma (2004, pp. 286–87). Also see Jervis (1976, pp. 63–64, 1978, pp. 168–69, 185–87) and Glaser (1992, pp. 501–05). Some scholars (Schweller 1996, p. 117; Collins 2000, p. 25) do not agree that security dilemmas can arise from offensive behaviour, asserting that only the ‘classic’ security dilemma as Herz (1950) and Butterfield (1951) conceptualised it is properly a security dilemma.

<sup>7</sup>On ‘false optimism’ as a cause of war, see Blainey (1988) and Van Evera (1999, pp. 14–34).

<sup>8</sup>Snyder (1985, p. 156), for example, notes that in a situation in which ‘[a]ll states prefer compromise to a major war’, a security dilemma can ‘arise from the dynamics of limited competition over non-security interests’ as ‘expansionists [seek] to achieve their limited imperial aims without provoking a major war, which would entail disproportionate costs and risks’. More briefly, Jervis (1993, p. 245) also suggested that even a generally ‘aggressive’ state may end up in a war that it did not desire, as either it or its opponent succumbs to ‘the reciprocal fear of surprise attack’. This appears to be what Roe (2004, pp. 288–89) has in mind by a ‘loose’ security dilemma.

<sup>9</sup>Van Evera (1999, p. 185) has also noted that ‘security motives . . . are in fact ubiquitous’ and almost always play a role ‘sometimes minor, often major’ in causing wars.

defensive and offensive capabilities (Jervis 1978, pp. 199–206; Posen 1993, pp. 29–31; Glaser 1997, pp. 186–87). Actors can also have strategic and diplomatic incentives to misrepresent offensive intentions as defensive ones.

The challenge of determining motivations and intentions in internal conflict is especially great. Part of this challenge is a matter of definition. When a national government confronts a secessionist region, for example, it is usually not motivated (or not only motivated) by what we might consider to be conventional security concerns, the protection of territory or population under *de facto* state control or the tightening of *de facto* state borders. It is also seeking to establish control over lost territory, something often considered a goal motivated by ambition (or predation or greed). However, the defence of sovereignty over one's territory is the *sine qua non* of state security by virtually all standards of international relations. It is thus a real question whether a government's efforts, armed or otherwise, to establish control over territory legally recognised as part of the state's sovereign domain should ever be defined as anything other than security-driven. While an observer might try to draw an analytical line between insecurity and other motivations (such as ambition, predation or greed) in triggering conflict between a state and a secessionist actor, it is more difficult to demonstrate that they are so conceptually divided in actors' own minds.

This does not mean that we must lump together all motivations that can lead to an internal security dilemma. Theoretically, governments can be motivated by conventional, or what we might call 'inland', security—if, for example, secessionist regions have launched military strikes or have been a base for terrorist activities. In such cases, governments could act to shore up inland security in the absence of more abstract concerns for territorial integrity. It may be possible, thus, to determine at least what 'kind' of security a government seeks—inland security or a more abstract notion of state security related to the defence of territorial integrity. At the same time, a government may be motivated simultaneously by inland insecurity, an abstract sense of insecurity linked to the loss of territory, and a range of ambitions that encourage it to regain lost territories (including political glory or advantage, and international strategic or economic advantage).

In addition to motivations, the intentions of a government toward a secessionist region can also be difficult to ascertain. Internal conflicts erase state borders that help differentiate offensive intentions from defensive ones. Between states, military movement across internationally recognised borders is by definition offensive. However, in the case of secessionist conflict, where borders are contested, the movement of armed forces 'across' an internal border does not necessarily imply offensive intentions. It may also signify an attempt to better defend territory that is poorly controlled by either side. This ambiguity is especially acute when citizens loyal to the state (usually of the ethnic majority) are located on the other side of a disputed internal border, allowing the state to reasonably claim a right to their defence.

With these ambiguities in mind, we turn our attention to the origin of armed conflict between Georgia and secessionist South Ossetia in 2004 and, in particular, the initial intentions and motivations of Georgia, whose change in behaviour triggered the conflict. Georgians may have had defensive intentions and been motivated to shore up their inland security, or they may have been planning offensive action to address Georgia's insecurity, whether inland or a more abstract kind. Alternatively, the

government may have been ambitious and may have harboured offensive intentions—even including war; these are all theoretically possible and, as we will see, empirically plausible. They all could have led to the process of escalation that occurred.

In the next section I describe Georgia's new policy toward South Ossetia after the 2003 Rose Revolution, a policy that triggered armed conflict between Georgians and South Ossetians. I then present the combinations of motivations and intentions that could have led to this policy. I contrast the Georgian government's public claim to defensive security-seeking behaviour with what was more privately revealed as limited offensive intentions. Finally, I address the diverse motivations behind such offensive (but not war-seeking) intentions.

*The trigger: 'Rose Revolutionary' Georgia's war on smuggling*

In May 1992, Georgians and Ossetians signed a peace agreement ending hostilities in one of the earliest violent conflicts to accompany the collapse of the USSR. The two ethnic communities lived interspersed in Georgia's formerly autonomous region of South Ossetia, now legally abolished but *de facto* independent; they traded peacefully in a region-wide black market of goods (including wholesale staples like flour and fuel) illegally imported to Georgia from Russia. This 'cold peace' offered little hope of a political settlement to the long-standing separatist conflict but was otherwise stable.

The Georgian–South Ossetian conflict reignited just months after Georgia's November 2003 Rose Revolution. The conflict began innocuously enough in the context of a 'war on smuggling' launched by Georgia's new government in a bid to improve state revenue collection, eradicate official involvement in cross-border crime, and to reduce the porosity of state borders. The anti-smuggling campaign began in Gori, the administrative centre of the Shida Kartli region that formally includes most of South Ossetia, by regional governor Irakli Okruashvili, who as Georgia's minister of internal affairs later became a principal actor in the South Ossetian events (Freese 2004a). In December, Georgian interior forces detained trucks importing Russian flour illegally via South Ossetia (without a customs check or paying Georgian excise tax) and raided a nearby flourmill.<sup>10</sup> At the end of the month, Okruashvili ordered the destruction of numerous roads leading out of South Ossetia that did not pass through populated areas and which authorities said were used for illegal imports.<sup>11</sup>

In the next months Georgian officials publicly paid little attention to South Ossetia, as they concentrated on forming a new government and pressuring regional despot

<sup>10</sup>*Imedi TV* (Tbilisi), *Rustavi-2 TV* (Tbilisi), and *ITAR-TASS* (Moscow), translated in *BBC Monitoring*, 11 December 2003, available via: <http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/lnacademic>, accessed November 2007; *IA Regnum* (Moscow), 11, 12 December 2003, available at: <http://www.regnum.ru>, accessed November 2007. In addition to the three translated sources above, all references to the sources listed below were accessed in translation in *BBC Monitoring* (available via: <http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/lnacademic>, all sites accessed November 2008): *Georgian State Television Channel One* (*Sakartvelos Sakhelmtsipo Televiziis Pirveli Arkhi*), *Kavkasia-Press*, *Mze TV* (Tbilisi), and *Channel One TV* (*Pervyi Kanal*), *Ekho Moskvyy Radio*, *Interfax*, *NTV*, *NTV Mir*, *Radio Mayak*, *RIA Novosti*, *RTR Russia TV*, *Tsentr-TV* and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (Moscow).

<sup>11</sup>*Imedi TV*, 27 December 2003.



Aslan Abashidze to surrender power in Georgia's autonomous republic of Adjara. However, a Georgian police presence in areas of South Ossetia, nominally under the control of the region's *de facto* authorities, was strengthened at this time.<sup>12</sup>

After the defeat of Abashidze at the start of May, the government again turned its full attention to South Ossetia, seeking to stop smuggling through the region and to offer heightened protection to 'islands' of ethnic Georgians, including those in the villages of the Didi Liakhvi gorge north of Tskhinvali, South Ossetia's administrative centre. In mid-May, Minister of Internal Affairs Giorgi Baramidze visited Georgian-populated villages to discuss the strengthening of local police forces and the insertion of new armed divisions into the region.<sup>13</sup> The anti-smuggling campaign involved the establishment of at least 13 Georgian checkpoints, mainly on the South Ossetian perimeter but including one within South Ossetia, in the village of Eredvi, a few kilometres from Tskhinvali in the Patara Liakhvi gorge to its east.<sup>14</sup> These checkpoints were staffed by police but also, in the words of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, 'party activists ... those people who want to make the country look decent'.<sup>15</sup> Okruashvili further explained: '[w]e organized 10 to 15 groups, gave them fuel and cars with an order to stop the contraband'. By the end of May, the campaign in South Ossetia [had come] to resemble an election drive, with extra interior ministry personnel, local authorities, and villagers working round-the-clock shifts' (Freese 2005, p. 112).

As a result of such frenetic activity, the operation appeared to accomplish its goal. On 24 May, the new governor of Shida Kartli, Mikheil Kareli, reported that 40 roads leading out of South Ossetia had been closed.<sup>16</sup> One week later, Saakashvili boasted that the government had 'completely stopped contraband from South Ossetia'. Other government officials affirmed that, thanks to the operations of recent weeks, contraband passing through South Ossetia had been reduced to almost nothing and that the Ergneti market, the locus of trade in goods transiting through South Ossetia located on the region's southern border, was starved of goods and would soon be closed.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Why trigger conflict? Georgia's initial motivations and intentions*

What was Georgia trying to accomplish in bringing the 'war on smuggling' to South Ossetia? The initial insertion of armed personnel primarily around, rather than in, South Ossetia (with the exception of the Georgian villages) suggests that officials meant what they said, that the operations were part of a defensive 'inland' strategy intended to tighten Georgia's *de facto* state borders by reasserting control over transit

<sup>12</sup>Police were deployed in the Georgian-populated areas of Proni, southwest of Tskhinvali, and Patara Liakhvi, east of Tskhinvali. By the end of April, 64 policemen were operating in these two gorges (Freese 2004a).

<sup>13</sup>*IA Regnum*, 18 May 2004.

<sup>14</sup>*Imedi TV*, 31 May 2004; *ITAR-TASS*, 31 May, 6 June 2004.

<sup>15</sup>*Georgian State Television Channel One* (Tbilisi), 31 May 2004.

<sup>16</sup>*IA Regnum*, 24 May 2004.

<sup>17</sup>The market was reported closed by mid-June (*Georgian State Television Channel One* and *Imedi TV*, 31 May 2004; *Kavkasia-Press* (Tbilisi), 12 June 2004; *IA Regnum*, 14 June 2004).

traffic to and from South Ossetia. At the same time, the fact that armed personnel were inserted directly into South Ossetia at all suggests that Georgia may not have been seeking only to establish a defensive perimeter of its *de facto* border but to make inroads within South Ossetia proper, whether incrementally by expanding territorial control, or by seeking full control over the region. If so, such offensive action could have had a number of different motivations: the protection of ‘inland’ security through a more forward-leaning posture; the securing of a more abstract state security through the restoration of territorial integrity; or the fulfilment of various political and personal ambitions by retaking lost territory.

*Defensive security?*

Georgia’s actions in South Ossetia might have been motivated by inland insecurity and intended as solely defensive. Tightening the borders with South Ossetia was in line with the Georgian authorities’ overall goal of increasing state security by securing the country’s borders and strengthening state institutions, including clamping down on border corruption and increasing customs revenue. This was a significant element of the platform that had elevated the ruling team to power, and, by the time the conflict began, the government had already begun to employ other tactics to battle corruption and increase budget revenues, such as compelling businesspeople to pay formerly overlooked tax arrears, and reforming the traffic police. Soon after, the government began to purge border guards and customs personnel (Areshidze 2007, pp. 193–95, 211–16; Welt 2005a).

From the standpoint of border security, taking the ‘war on smuggling’ to South Ossetia made sense. South Ossetia was long acknowledged to be a channel for the import of contraband goods into Georgia. Georgian officials also argued that this uncontrolled territory could serve as a route for arms and drug trafficking, as well as a haven for criminals or terrorists, a plausible contention given its border with Russia’s fragile North Caucasus region. By this interpretation, increasing a police presence in Georgian-populated villages within South Ossetia could have been intrinsically defensive, a precautionary measure to deter potential reprisals by those negatively affected by the stepped-up monitoring of the border.

This security logic was matched by the government’s own explanations for its behaviour. Throughout the summer, Saakashvili insisted that Georgian mobilisation in South Ossetia was an element of the government’s broader security strategy. South Ossetia, he said in June,

was a black hole from where contraband was coming. We have stopped that contraband. This is the main achievement . . . According to my calculations, this will bring an extra 200–250 million lari [\$100–125 million] to the Georgian budget, once we have [also] blocked contraband in Samegrelo [the province bordering Georgia’s second breakaway region, Abkhazia]. Most of that money will be spent on strengthening our state agencies, including, in the first place, our police and military structures, so that there is peace and our population is protected.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Rustavi-2 TV*, 12 June 2004.

Over the next few weeks, Saakashvili repeatedly invoked this justification, noting that

[o]ur goal at this stage has been achieved. We have closed the economic border, blocked contraband, ensured the security of residents in the Didi and Patara Liakhvi gorges, and showed to everyone that we are not joking and are ready to defend Georgia's interests.<sup>19</sup>

He later reiterated this claim: 'We have closed our economic borders. Now Georgia should get stronger and get back on its feet. It should get stronger in all respects—militarily, economically and from the point of view of policing'.<sup>20</sup>

*Or offensive intentions?*

While an interpretation of Georgian behaviour as defensive and motivated by inland security is plausible, in point of fact the Georgian government was not pursuing a solely defensive strategy. It was trying to subvert—and ultimately depose—the local regime as a precursor to the reassertion of state control over South Ossetia. In private, Georgian ministers and other officials acknowledged that their strategy in South Ossetia 'wasn't only economic'.<sup>21</sup> The Georgian government had

set to work in early 2004 using anti-contraband measures as a dual-purpose mechanism: ... to add revenues to Georgia's ailing budget [but also] to oust the ... government of the *de facto* president, Eduard Kokoiti ... Without contraband funds to prop up his government and security services, Kokoiti's 'regime of bandits' would fall apart, or so went the thinking. (Freese 2005, pp. 109–10)

Underpinning this strategy was a belief that the Georgian government could persuade the South Ossetian population to back efforts to oust the local leadership and return the region to its control. Georgian officials thought that 'Ossetians, fed up with the "corrupt Kokoiti clan", would rise up against him [Kokoiti], similar to what occurred in Adjara' (Freese 2005, p. 109). In the first weeks of conflict, Georgian officials repeated mantra-like that South Ossetians were no different than Georgians and were sufficiently disillusioned with their 'criminal' leadership to support political change.<sup>22</sup> Though they did not know how much support they could get, they appeared to believe that a sufficient number of Ossetians were ready for change and willing to side with the Georgians against their own leadership to reach a tipping point for mass mobilisation. Even Georgian civil society activists, key actors in Georgia's Rose

<sup>19</sup>*Imedi TV*, 13 July 2004. Saakashvili also noted that '[i]n general, we, of course, have managed to do the main thing—all [ethnic Georgian] villages are protected. In principle the security regime is very firm' (*Rustavi-2 TV*, 12 July 2004).

<sup>20</sup>*Imedi TV*, 19 July 2004.

<sup>21</sup>Author's interview (anonymous), October 2004, Tbilisi.

<sup>22</sup>Givi Targamadze, chairman of the Georgian parliament's defence and security committee, insisted at the start of June that 'the attitude of 99 per cent of South Ossetia's population is absolutely unambiguous. They invariably refer to this person [Kokoiti] as a bandit who runs his own group of bandits' (*Rustavi-2 TV*, 2 June 2004). Also see *RIA Novosti* (Moscow), 2 June 2004; *Imedi TV*, 8 July 2004; and *Ekho Moskvyy Radio* (Moscow), 13 July 2004.

Revolution, were operating in Tskhinvali at the time, seeking ‘to attract revolutionary support from within the Ossetian community’.<sup>23</sup>

To further encourage South Ossetians, the government sought to establish Georgia’s benevolence toward the Ossetian population through a series of ‘socio-economic incentives’. These included ‘establishing an Ossetian-language television station in Shida Kartli; providing pensions to Ossetian pensioners; re-establishing the “Tskhinvali Railway”, . . . defunct for 12 years; [and] providing free ambulatory care and agricultural chemicals’ for local residents (Freese 2004b). On 4 June, Shida Kartli governor Kareli ‘made his first humanitarian mission to deliver fertilizer’ to Ossetian villages (Freese 2004c). The humanitarian initiative was designed to ‘soften the ground’, according to one government minister, to demonstrate to Ossetians that the ‘anti-smuggling’ fight was not an offensive act directed against them, just its leadership.<sup>24</sup>

While Georgian authorities did not officially acknowledge their strategy during the summer, they hinted at it from time to time. Security Minister Ivane Merabishvili asserted that Kokoiti was seeking to provoke conflict because ‘he has no other chance to stay in power’, elaborating that ‘people have appeared among the ethnic Ossetians who openly criticize the Kokoiti government’s plans’. He also drew an explicit parallel with the downfall of Abashidze’s regime in Adjara two months before, when street protests unnerved Abashidze to the point that he took the self-destructive move of cutting ground transport links with the rest of Georgia: ‘[Kokoiti’s] operation today is very similar to the blowing up of the bridges [in Adjara]. We should stand as firm as we stood at the time when we did not immediately take “appropriate steps”’.<sup>25</sup> Minister of Internal Affairs Okruashvili, refusing to give arms to panicked Georgian villagers, beseeched them to ‘give us a little more time. We are handling everything according to our plan . . . [W]e are doing everything to end this situation once and for all’.<sup>26</sup>

*Limited offensive or the road to a wanted war?*

That Georgia had offensive intentions requires us to be cautious in interpreting the subsequent escalation as driven by a security dilemma. Georgia’s opponents regularly accused Georgia of using the ‘war on smuggling’ as an excuse to insert high numbers of clandestine armed forces in the region in preparation for a full-scale military operation. They ultimately argued that the Georgians wanted to provoke the South Ossetians into trying to attack Georgian villages, precisely to justify such an

<sup>23</sup>At the end of May, Tea Tutberidze, a leader of the Georgian youth movement *Kmara*, ‘explained that one Ossetian group, which goes by the Ossetian word for *Kmara*—*Fagu*—[had] been acting undercover in Tskhinvali for the last month and [was] responsible for developing ties with other frustrated branches of the Ossetian population. Tutberidze stressed that all activists were to be Ossetian, not Georgian, and that all groups [would] develop inside Tskhinvali [to avoid] anti-government activities [being] rejected as a Georgian import’ (Freese 2004b). Also see *IA Regnum*, 24 May 2004.

<sup>24</sup>Author’s interview (anonymous), October 2004, Tbilisi.

<sup>25</sup>*Imedi TV*, 8 July 2004.

<sup>26</sup>*Rustavi-2 TV*, 8 July 2004.

offensive.<sup>27</sup> If this is true, then escalation could have been an intentional element of a Georgian war of choice, in which case the security dilemma (which explains unwanted wars) would not pertain. If, however, Georgia intended only limited offensive action, and did not desire broader conflict, then the security dilemma would be relevant, so long as Georgia assumed such offensive actions were not going to endanger its security.

In the absence of archival evidence, it is difficult to prove that an actor that appears to be heading towards war does not really want war. Governments that want to go to war do not always openly declare war or launch first strikes. Sensitive to the opinion of other states or of their own publics, they may seek war but do not want to move first. They may try to make war appear defensive, unwanted, and necessary, rather than offensive, desired, and optional. As Georgia's opponents professed to believe, they may intentionally seek escalation with the hopes of provoking the other side to strike first.

Georgian officials were consistent in their insistence that they had no desire to fight a war. Mirroring South Ossetian claims about Georgia, officials (like Merabishvili above) argued throughout the conflict that the South Ossetians were the ones seeking to provoke a conflict, threatening Georgian villages so that Georgia would strike first, thereby giving Russia an excuse to counterattack and take greater control of South Ossetia.<sup>28</sup> As the conflict developed, Saakashvili expressed frustration at the reluctance of the South Ossetian authorities to negotiate a way out of the impasse and insisted the Georgian side was offering peaceful solutions to the South Ossetians:

We say, 'Let's talk', and they say: 'We're not talking to you', and then they say: 'You're talking to us but you want military intervention'. If we did want military intervention, we wouldn't be talking. We wouldn't be putting forward compromise options. If we had decided on a military solution to the issue, there'd be no talk of flexible solutions to the problems that have built up there.<sup>29</sup>

After the South Ossetians had launched an operation to detain some Georgian troops, Merabishvili insisted that Georgia had to avoid 'launching a military operation' and becoming 'drawn into a large-scale war'. He explained that 'the Russian authorities will be forced to get involved in this process' and this would be 'the most dangerous thing for [Georgia] and we must avert it'. Merabishvili told reporters that the Georgian authorities had 'issued an order not to use arms because we did not want to get drawn into a conflict'.<sup>30</sup> Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania concurred, asserting that '[b]y no means will we allow a repetition of the tragedy that,

<sup>27</sup>For example, Russian parliamentary deputy Andrei Kokoshin, whose convoy came under fire while travelling in South Ossetia during the summer, blamed the Georgians for engaging in provocations. 'Indeed', Kokoshin said, 'all such actions are evidently geared towards getting the other side to snap and to be the first to undertake actions of some kind. This is one of my main impressions from my visit' (*Ekho Moskvyy Radio*, 6 August 2004).

<sup>28</sup>*Imedi TV* and *Rustavi-2 TV*, 8 July 2004. Also see Freese (2004d).

<sup>29</sup>*Imedi TV*, 2 July 2004.

<sup>30</sup>*Imedi TV*, 8 July 2004.

unfortunately, we were part of in 1991. We will not allow a repetition of armed conflict between Georgians and Ossetians'.<sup>31</sup>

After the first exchanges of fire, Saakashvili still insisted Georgia was not seeking a fight:

We do not need a war . . . Georgia is not a tribe of some wild natives, so to speak, who grab their weapons as soon as the other side says something or moves. We are a state and we will act like a state.<sup>32</sup>

Addressing a small gathering of Tbilisi-based Ossetians the next day, he elaborated:

If the Georgian government had wanted to start a war, it has had more than enough grounds to do so. Our soldiers have been forced to go down on their knees, people have been kidnapped, people have been wounded, and roads have been attacked. What other grounds would have been needed if we had really wanted to start a war?<sup>33</sup>

Even in the final days of the conflict, Georgia tenaciously held to this position. Defence Minister Baramidze insisted to Russian radio that force was not an option. Repeating the demand for 'direct dialogue' with South Ossetian authorities that Georgian officials had called for throughout the summer, Baramidze insisted that

[w]e could resolve the problem of South Ossetia through the use of force today if we wanted to. We have had sufficient cause for this. But, with clenched teeth, we showed restraint and did not take the step that these separatists no doubt deserved. And we have remained loyal to our policy of finding a solution through peaceful means.<sup>34</sup>

On 16 August, three days before the end of conflict, Okruashvili said that Georgia would

do [its] utmost not to . . . fire a single shot, not least because the Ossetians who are dying are, of course, our fellow citizens. Sooner or later . . . we will have to live together. So we should do our utmost to make sure that this confrontation does not lead to a situation where it takes years to heal our wounds.<sup>35</sup>

Such protestations of innocence do not prove conclusively that Georgia did not desire a forcible solution to the conflict. However, as Saakashvili pointed out, as the conflict intensified, Georgia seemed to collect enough excuses to attack if that was what it wanted to do. When taken into consideration with Georgia's 'humanitarian initiative' and attempts to mobilise the local Ossetian population against its own

<sup>31</sup>Minister of Internal Affairs Irakli Okruashvili made similar remarks. For the remarks of both Zhvania and Okruashvili, see *Rustavi-2 TV*, 8 July 2004.

<sup>32</sup>*Rustavi-2 TV*, 10 July 2004.

<sup>33</sup>*Rustavi-2 TV*, 11 July 2004.

<sup>34</sup>*Radio Mayak* (Moscow), 11 August 2004. Saakashvili added that '[w]e must thwart the plans drawn up by external forces to drag Georgia into a large-scale armed conflict on its own territory. We do not need this conflict. We intend to unify the country peacefully' (*Imedi TV*, 12 August 2004).

<sup>35</sup>*Rustavi-2 TV*, 16 August 2004.

regime, such denials take on even greater plausibility; it would have been exceptionally cynical for Georgia to pursue war secretly while openly courting the local population. In sum, we do not know for certain that Georgia was not preparing to fight for South Ossetia, but the evidence suggests it was not.

*Motivating the offensive?*

Ascertaining intentions is not the same thing as determining the motivations that drive them. If offensive intentions can be motivated by insecurity or ambition, all the more can limited offensive intentions have diverse motivations. Conceivably, Georgia's limited offensive intentions were driven solely by inland insecurity. Geography made it difficult to monitor the South Ossetian border from the outside. Short of utilising 'an entire army' for border monitoring (as one government minister put it), South Ossetia remained a highly porous region in which goods and people could enter and exit freely through the Roki tunnel at the South Ossetian–Russian border, one of only two main entry points for vehicle traffic into Georgia from Russia, or by using bypass roads that could be built as fast as the Georgian authorities destroyed them.<sup>36</sup> Only by moving onto the main arteries close to and within South Ossetia—including the central road north of Tskhinvali—could Georgia really deter contraband and monitor traffic passing through the region.

This line of thinking could have led even to a decision to depose the South Ossetian regime. A limited strategy of inserting armed forces and locking down transit traffic within the conflict zone was not a viable security strategy in the long-term because it contained the potential for violent conflict. The only stable way to provide for Georgia's inland security was to control South Ossetia's border crossing with Russia, at the Roki tunnel, which would ensure full oversight of traffic coming through South Ossetia. The South Ossetian authorities firmly opposed this, however, as it would be seen as a significant step toward legitimising Georgian sovereignty over South Ossetia. Given Ossetian resistance, Georgia was seemingly faced with the choice, in pursuit of inland security, of either tolerating sustained conflict as Ossetians attempted to dislodge Georgian checkpoints in the region or attempting to depose the leadership and establish a more pliant regime.

Unfortunately, it is not easy to determine whether the Georgian leadership was thinking along these lines, or whether it was motivated mainly by more abstract notions of state security *qua* territorial integrity, or simply by ambitions of territorial restoration. One piece of evidence that at least suggests other motivations were present is that the Georgian government was aware of other strategies it could have employed if inland security was indeed its sole concern. Recognising the potential for escalation inherent in inserting troops into the conflict zone, the local mission of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), responsible for monitoring the peace, had directly discussed with the government the prospect of posting 'anti-contraband' checkpoints on roads located outside the conflict zone, something which OSCE officials had thought was an 'excellent idea', according to one international

<sup>36</sup> Author's interview (anonymous), October 2004, Tbilisi.

NGO worker involved in the discussions.<sup>37</sup> While such an option might have been less effective than stationing troops within the conflict zone, Georgian officials did not know just how less effective a 'second-best' option of tightening border controls outside the conflict zone would be.

One reason why Georgia did not attempt such an approach reflects an abstract concern for state security. The Georgian government had a longstanding policy, predating the Rose Revolution, of not officially establishing customs and security checkpoints at the *de facto* border with South Ossetia, as officials believed this would help harden the border between South Ossetia and Georgia. This, the Georgians feared, would imply recognition of South Ossetian independence and help predetermine a political outcome to conflict that would not reunite South Ossetia to Georgia. So while it might have been possible to tighten the border from points outside the conflict zone, this option may have been rejected due to a concern about what such an approach would mean, symbolically and practically, for Georgia's claim to sovereignty over South Ossetia.

Of course, South Ossetian separatism also represented a more traditional security threat. It affected Georgian security *vis-à-vis* Russia, a far greater adversary than South Ossetia itself. Georgian authorities stressed as a matter of course that Russia had 'complete control over South Ossetia . . . prop[ping it up] by financing pensions, government salaries, and security forces, and by providing Russian passports and residency documents to South Ossetians' (Freese 2004e). At the leadership level, Kokoiti was propped up by the Russian military intelligence and security apparatuses (GRU and FSB). According to a senior Georgian intelligence official in 2004, South Ossetia's *de facto* minister of defence was a former GRU officer, while the chairman of its state security committee was from the FSB.<sup>38</sup> A senior defence official added that 'law enforcement in South Ossetia is done by the Russians'.<sup>39</sup> In fact, the intelligence official said, 'Kokoiti is [just] the face' of a far deeper Russian authority in the region.<sup>40</sup> Georgian insecurity thus stemmed not only from the fact of South Ossetian

<sup>37</sup> Author's interview (anonymous), October 2004, Tbilisi. Other alternatives, at least to partially address Georgian border concerns, were also conceivable. Aleko Kupatadze, co-author of a study on smuggling in South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Kukhianidze *et al.* 2004), suggested that, rather than enforce a blockade, Georgia could have reduced excise taxes on the most commonly smuggled goods—flour, cigarettes and fuel. It also could have imported more flour legally, dropping the price of flour and making the import of contraband flour less profitable for Russian companies sending truckloads of flour to sell in South Ossetia and Georgia on the cheap, paying only nominal customs fees/bribes to Ossetian officials. (Author's interviews with Aleko Kupatadze, October 2004, Tbilisi.)

<sup>38</sup> Author's interview, October 2004, Tbilisi. Anatoly Barankevich was South Ossetia's *de facto* minister of defence from July 2004. In December 2006, he was appointed secretary of South Ossetia's security council. He was previously Russia's first deputy military commissioner in Chechnya and in the Stavropol region. From at least December 2004 until March 2006, the South Ossetian KGB chairman was Anatoly Yarovoi, formerly regional head of the FSB in the Russian republic of Mordovia. These were joined in July 2005 by Yuri Morozov, South Ossetia's *de facto* prime minister (until he was removed after the 2008 war), who hails from the Russian republic of Bashkortostan (*Rustavi-2 TV*, 17 January 2005; *Interfax* (Moscow), 18 January 2005; 'Russian Officials in Georgia Separatist Governments', Georgia Update, Government of Georgia, 21 September 2008, available at: <http://georgiaupdate.gov.ge/en/doc/10006631/Annex%20%20Russian%20officials.pdf>, accessed September 2008).

<sup>39</sup> Author's interview (anonymous), October 2004, Tbilisi.

<sup>40</sup> Author's interview (anonymous), October 2004, Tbilisi.



separatism but from a significantly more powerful adversary, Russia, which could use the region as a base to further weaken Georgia with the aim of returning it to the Russian sphere of influence, or at least formalising South Ossetia's secession. To Georgians, restoring sovereignty over South Ossetia was inseparable from ensuring state security.

At the same time, an explanation for Georgia's actions rooted in ambition rather than security is also conceivable. Bolstered by their confidence in coming to power and the ease of their victory in Adjara, the Georgian government and Mikheil Saakashvili in particular may have desired more 'revolutionary' successes for reasons of regime and personal legitimacy, while committed to the ideal of restoring Georgia's territorial integrity. This alone may have motivated the authorities to launch a limited, primarily non-violent, offensive to wrest control of South Ossetia from its separatist authorities and return it to Georgia, regardless of the possible effects of such a move on Georgian security.

In the end, it is difficult to identify precisely the motivations behind Georgia's actions. Georgia's limited offensive actions in South Ossetia could have been motivated by 'inland' insecurity. If so, they were equally driven by a motivation to avoid steps that would further separate South Ossetia from Georgia, a motivation that could be ascribed to an abstract notion of state security and one reinforced by perceptions of the Russian threat. It is also possible, however, that claims of insecurity obscured more ambitious motivations to restore lost territory. In the end, Georgian officials themselves may have had difficulty discerning their prime motivation for seeking to reclaim South Ossetia.

#### *The internal security dilemma at work*

Whatever the combination of intentions and motivations that leads an actor to a security dilemma, the escalation that unfolds is a variation on a theme: an actor takes measures that reduce the security of another actor, that actor responds with actions (or rhetoric) that make the first actor insecure, and the cycle recurs. This mutual insecurity is said to be magnified in an internal security dilemma, in part because of heightened uncertainty regarding an opponent's intentions. Such uncertainty is at least partially due to the 'rudimentary' nature of the weaponry that is often used in such conflicts, which makes differentiating between offensive and defensive capabilities more difficult than in inter-state conflict (Posen 1993, p. 29). We can add to this the point made in the previous section: that the reduced significance of borders in internal conflicts promotes the indistinguishability of offensive and defensive action.

Most analyses of the security dilemma in internal conflicts also focus on the increased vulnerabilities of internal conflicts produced by 'islands' of ethnic settlement (Posen 1993; Van Evera 1994, pp. 38–41; Kaufmann 1996, pp. 147–49). These 'islands' are populations 'distributed across the nominal territory of another group' in such a way as to be vulnerable to attack (Posen 1993, p. 32). As such, they increase the first-strike incentives for both parties. The presence of such 'islands' can encourage ethnically-related kin, uncertain of the intentions of the group surrounding the 'islands', to take offensive action to protect them. At the same time, groups

surrounding ethnic 'islands', uncertain of the intentions of the latter's kin, might also fear attack and so take (or threaten) pre-emptive action against them (Posen 1993, pp. 32–33; Kaufmann 1996, p. 148). Finally, though they are not typically treated as such in analyses of security dilemmas, external actors that support one or the other side can also make an 'internal' security dilemma more acute. In the case of conflicts where a secessionist actor has an outside supporter, the latter can heighten the capacity of the secessionist actor to respond to a state's initial actions; magnify the insecurity to the state caused by that response; or encourage the state to perceive the response as unambiguously offensive and, hence, requiring armed response.<sup>41</sup>

Given these elaborations, a 'structural' security dilemma largely appears to explain the unfolding of escalation in the 2004 conflict in South Ossetia. Uncertainty about Georgian intentions prompted South Ossetian authorities to employ rhetoric and take actions that threatened Georgian villages. In turn, Georgian uncertainty about South Ossetian intentions prompted Georgian authorities to shore up their defences of Georgian villages and establish a secure road to move men and supplies in and, if necessary, villagers out. This, in turn, threatened the South Ossetians, since Tskhinvali was nearly surrounded by Georgian villages and because the main road to Russia, Tskhinvali's 'lifeline' for food, equipment, reinforcement, and evacuation, ran straight through the Georgian villages to its north. Ossetians thus counterattacked to push Georgian troops out of their new positions and to prevent them from securing even more advantageous positions on the heights surrounding Tskhinvali. Meanwhile, Russian support increased South Ossetian confidence and deterrence capabilities while greatly enlarging the Georgian perception of offensive threat. The escalation that unfolded was driven by a security dilemma: what Georgians (and, for that matter, South Ossetians) did to enhance their security caused reactions that made them increasingly less secure.

That said, we must be wary of employing too mechanistic a model of escalation. Security-dilemma analyses tend to shy away from arguing that structural features determine action. Reactions and counter-reactions are not necessarily the actions of uncertain and vulnerable actors hedging their bets, but of actors who employ a variety of decision-making mechanisms and shortcuts in an effort to actually divine an opponent's intentions and react appropriately. Such processes can produce actions that would not necessarily have been taken if actors were operating on the basis of structural conditions alone.

How structural and perceptual factors interact to produce escalation is something that has been explored only partially in the study of internal conflicts. The dominant focus has been on how national identity and historical understandings inform decisions in the context of uncertainty. Posen (1993, pp. 30–31), for example, argued that actors in internal conflict use historical behaviour as a shortcut 'to assess the offensive implications' of group solidarity. Other authors

<sup>41</sup>While Posen (1993, p. 32) considered the role of external supporters, he viewed them as having mainly a stabilising effect, to 'deter would-be aggressors [against ethnic islands] by threatening to retaliate in one way or another'. He said nothing about external actors that support 'would-be aggressors' against ethnic islands. On the role of external actors in secessionist conflicts, also see Saideman (2001).

(Van Evera 1994, pp. 44–52; Lemarchand 1996; Arfi 1998; Kaufman 2001; Petersen 2002) have elaborated on how historical behaviour and myths about the nature and past behaviour of one's own group and others can fuel security-dilemma escalation. By comparison, psychological explanations for escalation unrelated to issues of identity and history remain under-investigated. Robert Jervis, the scholar who pioneered the systematic study of the security dilemma, conducted much of the groundbreaking work in this field. His treatment of the cognitive sources of perception and misperception (Jervis 1968, 1976) offers an intermediary between structure and action in internal conflict that is as appropriate as that provided by theories of identity and memory.

Indeed, the escalation of conflict in South Ossetia in 2004 did not grow organically out of structural features, even with the addition of well-formulated historical myths and memories that Georgians and Ossetians could (and, in some instances, did) invoke while attempting to assess the other side's intentions. Instead, it was triggered by a rapid overnight deployment of special forces troops into the South Ossetian conflict zone, a factor that cannot be explained on the basis of uncertainty, vulnerability, history and identity alone. This deployment was an over-reaction to a Russian threat to eliminate Georgian checkpoints that had its roots in organisational (mis)behaviour more than in uncertainty and group insecurity. South Ossetians and Russians interpreted the significance of this action in a manner consistent with psychological theories of perception that argue that actors in conflict tend to reject accident or disorganisation as an explanation for their opponents' behaviour, especially when that behaviour appears to reflect offensive intent. In turn, Georgians interpreted the South Ossetian and Russian response also in a psychologically predictable fashion—by presuming that, even given the ambiguous signals they had accidentally emitted, the other side would be able to discern the limited intentions the Georgians themselves knew they held. Heightened uncertainty and vulnerability may have provided the context for security-dilemma escalation, but blunders and cognitive misperceptions drove it forward.

*A conflict takes shape (31 May–6 July)*

Early on 31 May, Georgia took the step which most proximately triggered escalation to armed conflict—the deployment of several hundred interior ministry troops and security forces to four checkpoints within the South Ossetian conflict zone (three of which were outside South Ossetia proper).<sup>42</sup> After the South Ossetian authorities and Russian-led peacekeeping forces issued protests, Georgia agreed to withdraw the extra troops, but nevertheless, they established a 'special headquarters' within the conflict zone (albeit outside South Ossetia) in the village of Tkviavi (Freese 2004b). In addition, Saakashvili announced that Georgia would increase the number of legal Georgian troops in the region by increasing its

<sup>42</sup>Georgian officials said that 300 Georgian interior ministry troops were involved, while the South Ossetian authorities claimed the total was 700 members of the interior forces, and an additional 200 personnel (*Interfax*, 31 May 2004; *RIA Novosti*, 1 June 2004).

contingent in the Joint Peacekeeping Force (JPF) from 90 to the full 500 permissible.<sup>43</sup> On 6 June, Georgia dispatched its first new set of 150 peacekeeping troops to the Didi Liakhvi gorge.<sup>44</sup>

The South Ossetian authorities, joined by Russia, swiftly and clearly responded with rhetoric and actions aimed to deter Georgia from initiating any hostilities. After the 31 May deployment, Kokoit'i accused Georgia of preparing a large-scale military operation and warned that 'the armed forces of South Ossetia have been ordered to destroy any aircraft or regiments that cross the border of South Ossetia'.<sup>45</sup> Entering the fray a day later, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued the first of a stream of stern communiqués, warning Georgia that its actions could 'lead to the most dire and unpredictable consequences'. In case Tbilisi failed to understand, the ministry added that Georgia 'should be aware of the gravity of the situation now obtaining' and would be fully responsible for any 'violence and bloodshed' that might occur.<sup>46</sup> Words were coupled with action: Georgian officials announced two days later that some tens of vehicles containing military supplies and weapons had crossed the Russian border into South Ossetia.<sup>47</sup>

To Georgians, who were in fact not mobilising for military action, these words and movements were a wholly disproportionate response to their actions, indicating to them the South Ossetians' and Russians' own hostile intent. As a result, they responded with their own deterrence and took additional defensive measures which, in turn, threatened the South Ossetians. Georgian Minister of Internal Affairs Okruashvili said that Georgia reserved the right to send 'even more forces' into the region, as Georgian forces began to make operational a rugged 'bypass road' skirting Tskhinvali and linking the ethnic Georgian villages of Patara Liakhvi and Didi Liakhvi.<sup>48</sup> The South Ossetian authorities complained that Georgian forces were establishing a blockade of Ossetian border villages, preventing residents from bringing in basic necessities.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, at the time the local Georgian authorities and security officials were 'man[ning] contraband checkpoints and roads all day and particularly at night when trafficking [was] at its highest'. They were 'dig[ging] trenches into smuggling roads' and following smugglers across fields. 'We are working entirely on this issue now', one official noted, 'and we haven't slept in four days' (Freese 2004d). Tensions increased as a result of a series of arrests and counter-arrests in the last weeks of June; in all, Okruashvili 'counted 40 disappearances or short-term detentions' on the Georgian side (Freese 2005, p. 114).<sup>50</sup>

<sup>43</sup> *Georgian State Television Channel One*, 31 May 2004.

<sup>44</sup> *Rustavi-2 TV*, 3 June 2004; *Kavkasia-Press*, 6 June 2004.

<sup>45</sup> *Interfax*, 31 May 2004. Also see *ITAR-TASS*, 10 June 2004.

<sup>46</sup> Press Release, 'On the Situation Around South Ossetia', Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 1 June 2004, available at: [http://www.ln.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/sps/7D63CF5CE5019AEEC3256EA7003CCC7E](http://www.ln.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/sps/7D63CF5CE5019AEEC3256EA7003CCC7E), accessed November 2007.

<sup>47</sup> An aide to the commander of Russia's North Caucasus Military District acknowledged that military trucks had come across the border, although he said they were carrying only routine supplies. The Russian Ministry of Defence denied any military transit into South Ossetia (*NTV* (Moscow), *ITAR-TASS* and *Interfax*, 12 June 2004).

<sup>48</sup> *Imedi TV*, 12 and 14 June 2004; *IA Regnum*, 14 June 2004.

<sup>49</sup> *IA Regnum*, 22 and 27 June 2004.

<sup>50</sup> On the arrests, see *IA Regnum*, 14 and 30 June 2004; *Kavkasia-Press*, 23 June 2004; *Imedi TV*, 22, 24 and 29 June 2004; *Rustavi-2 TV*, 30 June 2004; *RIA Novosti*, 1 July 2004; *ITAR-TASS*, 3 July 2004.

These detentions occurred against a backdrop of heightened Ossetian agitation against Georgian intervention. On 26 June, Kokoiti issued an order to establish checkpoints around Georgian villages.<sup>51</sup> The next day,

armed Ossetians blocked village roads for several hours [while] Ossetian forces intensified military training exercises in [the Patara Liakhvi village of Prisi] in what locals describe[d] as an intimidating show of force ... [Meanwhile.] Ossetians reportedly continue[d] to dig trenches around their capital and allow unauthorized armed persons to 'defend' Ossetian villages. (Freese 2004d)

On 2 July, Kokoiti called on local Georgians to 'rebuff ... instigators and force out illegal armed formations from your villages'.<sup>52</sup>

*Escalation to armed conflict (7 July–31 July)*

At this stage, though a cycle of insecurity and mutual suspicion was well underway, the situation still seemed far from armed conflict. At a 6 July meeting of the Russian–Georgian–Ossetian Joint Control Commission (JCC), tasked since 1992 with guaranteeing the continued cessation of hostilities in the region, the South Ossetian representative indicated that both sides had agreed to dismantle all newly established checkpoints. He said that South Ossetians had already removed theirs from around Georgian villages, while the Georgians had agreed to remove their reinforcements within two days.<sup>53</sup>

This seeming opportunity for de-escalation was quickly lost, however, with the discovery of ongoing armament. 'In the early hours of 7 July, Georgian peacekeepers, police, and local authorities' in Didi Liakhvi apprehended 'nine Russian vehicles carrying military equipment to Russian peacekeepers based in Tskhinvali' (Freese 2004e). In two of them, the Georgians uncovered 300 unguided missiles for use in helicopters. Georgian officials confiscated the trucks, offering to return the weapons to Russia, but not in South Ossetia.<sup>54</sup>

Furious at Georgia's interference, South Ossetian authorities, again joined by Russia, shifted from trying to deter the Georgians from launching hostilities to compelling them to eliminate their armed presence outside the JPF contingent and, especially, the new Georgian positions linking the villages of Didi and Patara Liakhvi. South Ossetian forces followed Georgian troops as they removed the confiscated vehicles down the bypass road to Patara Liakhvi, and set up position on surrounding territory above the bypass road and local Georgian-populated villages.<sup>55</sup> The Ossetian

<sup>51</sup> *ITAR-TASS*, 26 June 2004.

<sup>52</sup> *NTV Mir* (Moscow), 2 July 2004.

<sup>53</sup> *ITAR-TASS*, 6 July 2004; *Kavkasia-Press*, 6 July 2004.

<sup>54</sup> They first offered the confiscated weapons to the Russian military headquarters in Tbilisi, which refused to accept them. They were eventually returned at the Georgian–Russian border (*RIA Novosti*, 7 July 2004; *Rustavi-2 TV*, 7 and 11 July 2004; *Radio Mayak*, 12 July 2004; *Channel One TV* (Moscow), 7 and 24 July 2004).

<sup>55</sup> *Rustavi-2 TV*, 7 July 2004; briefing by OSCE military advisor, OSCE Mission to Georgia (Tskhinvali office), October 2004. Also see Freese (2004e).

JPF commander now announced that he could not be responsible for the actions of any Ossetian forces who were not peacekeepers (Freese 2004e). As Prisi, the closest Georgian-populated village to Tskhinvali ‘began to evacuate’ (Freese 2004e), Kokoiti announced that South Ossetia would take further measures ‘to prevent the entry of armed groups from Georgia to areas not under the control of the peacekeeping force’. He warned:

[I]n Tbilisi they do not think about the fate of residents of [the] Georgian-populated villages of South Ossetia . . . [I] confirm my order not to open fire on these settlements as long as there are no armed groups there, and to ensure [the] security of [the] peaceful Georgian population. At the same time, I once again call on my Georgian compatriots to expel groups of armed bandits from their villages irrespective of the uniform they wear. Do not let them turn your land into a battleground and ignite a new flame of war.<sup>56</sup>

The Russian Minister of Defence went so far as to state that Georgia’s actions gave Russia

the full right to take appropriate actions . . . It is too early to disclose the content of these actions. But I can say that they will make the Georgian forces reluctant to try the patience of our peacekeepers in South Ossetia and check them for strength once and for all.<sup>57</sup>

The next day, South Ossetian armed forces moved against Georgian internal security troops, detaining over 40 in the Patara Liakhvi village of Vanati. The troops surrendered without a fight and were taken to Tskhinvali where they were put on public display, kneeling with their hands behind their heads surrounded by South Ossetian forces.<sup>58</sup> Accusing the Georgians of ‘trying to pretend that all armed people [in the region] are peacekeepers’, regional authorities said there were at least 2,000 irregular Georgian armed forces in the region and noted that operations to detain them were being held in other villages as well.<sup>59</sup> Kokoiti insisted that the operation ‘in no way means that South Ossetia is trying to provoke a war. Quite the opposite, we are trying to make Georgia start implementing obligations that it has taken on earlier’.<sup>60</sup>

For Georgia, however, the detention underlined the fact that by this time Georgians faced an entirely different—and far less secure—context than that in which they had begun their South Ossetian operation. Georgian authorities now began to reframe their activity in the region from being part of a ‘war on smuggling’ to a more conventionally defensive operation. After the policemen were detained, Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania announced:

The main thing we must make clear to everyone . . . is that one of the plans Kokoiti and his entourage . . . are considering envisages an attack on Georgian villages . . . [T]he authorities

<sup>56</sup>*Rustavi-2 TV*, 7 July 2004.

<sup>57</sup>*ITAR-TASS*, 7 July 2004.

<sup>58</sup>*Channel One TV* and *Rustavi-2 TV*, 8 July 2004.

<sup>59</sup>*RIA Novosti* and *NTV Mir*, 8 July 2004.

<sup>60</sup>*Tsentr-TV* (Moscow), 8 July 2004.

of Georgia have absolutely all means at their disposal—and these are very serious means—to deliver an appropriate response to any violence.<sup>61</sup>

While most of the detained Georgian forces were released in two days, the tensions led to a rapid escalation of armed forces. The South Ossetian authorities announced they were accepting ‘volunteers’ from the North Caucasus and elsewhere to help defend South Ossetia against Georgian ‘aggression’.<sup>62</sup> After the Ossetian forces blocked the bypass road and dug trenches around Georgian villages, the latter’s inhabitants began to panic

and called on authorities to defend them or provide them with arms, and evacuate [them] increasingly rapidly . . . [T]he Georgian interior ministry deployed [more] troops to the region and organized villagers into groups of fifteen to twenty persons and provided them with arms to defend villages. (Freese 2004e)<sup>63</sup>

Acknowledging the insertion of extra troops, State Minister for Conflict Resolution Giorgi Khaindrava argued that Georgia was sending in ‘[o]nly those . . . necessary to ease tensions’.<sup>64</sup> A senior defence official later confirmed that Georgia had decided to increase its armed presence in the region after the detention of the policemen. It was at this time, he said, that Georgian soldiers first entered South Ossetia outside the peacekeeping framework.<sup>65</sup>

This escalation precipitated the first violent clashes of the summer between Ossetians and Georgians. On the day of the detention, a fire-fight between Ossetian and Georgian troops occurred near Tamarasheni, a Georgian village in Didi Liakhvi on the outskirts of Tskhinvali.<sup>66</sup> The next evening, Ossetians and Georgians engaged in another fire-fight on the outskirts of the village of Prisi, as Ossetians accused Georgians of trying to occupy a strategic hill.<sup>67</sup> In response, the Georgians set up a ‘coordination’ centre within South Ossetia proper, in Eredvi.<sup>68</sup> Other fire-fights occurred near Nikozi, another Georgian village, and again near Tamarasheni.<sup>69</sup>

Out of nowhere, war loomed. On 11 July, South Ossetian officials reported that 300 volunteers from the North Caucasus and elsewhere had arrived in the region. Kokoiiti ordered ‘all units to be in high combat readiness and to suppress the adversary’s fire units . . . We shall crush these bandits’ formations, destroy them and strike the points . . . where the Georgian military equipment is concentrated’.<sup>70</sup> The following

<sup>61</sup>*Imedi TV*, 8 July 2004.

<sup>62</sup>*RIA Novosti*, 8 July 2004; *Channel One TV*, 9 July 2004; *NTV Mir*, 11 July 2004.

<sup>63</sup>On 9 July, Russian peacekeepers reported that they had stopped tens of Georgian vehicles from moving across the South Ossetian border. However, some 150 Georgian forces reportedly managed to slip into the region nonetheless (*NTV Mir*, 9 July 2004).

<sup>64</sup>*NTV Mir*, 8 July 2004.

<sup>65</sup>Author’s interview (anonymous), October 2004, Tbilisi.

<sup>66</sup>*ITAR-TASS, Rustavi-2 TV*, 8 July 2004.

<sup>67</sup>*NTV* and *RIA Novosti*, 10 July 2004. Also see Freese (2004e).

<sup>68</sup>*Rustavi-2 TV*, 10 July 2004.

<sup>69</sup>*Channel One TV*, 9 July 2004; *RTR Russia TV* (Moscow), *Mze TV* (Tbilisi) and *ITAR-TASS*, 10 July 2004. Also see Freese (2004e).

<sup>70</sup>*NTV*, 11 July 2004.

day, South Ossetia held military exercises with the participation of what regional authorities said was at least 1,000 volunteers, not only from the North Caucasus but also from two other secessionist regions, Abkhazia and Moldovan Transdniestria.<sup>71</sup>

The Georgians also continued to increase their armed presence in the region. On 15 July, the South Ossetian authorities accused Georgia of inserting up to 800 more troops into the region.<sup>72</sup> The next day, Russian peacekeeping forces reported that Georgia had ‘almost doubled the strength of its police’ and that unidentified troops in Eredvi, possessing ammunition stores and military vehicles labelled as peacekeeping vehicles, were denying the JPF the right to investigate.<sup>73</sup> After Georgian forces confiscated a Russian anti-tank system on 18 July, Saakashvili responded that Georgia had no intention of withdrawing its forces from South Ossetia.<sup>74</sup>

Georgian and Ossetian troops exchanged fire several more times before the end of July, with gunfire reaching Tskhinvali and even the JPF headquarters.<sup>75</sup> By the end of the month, ‘a total of nine Georgian civilians and troops [had] been wounded, and one killed . . . Georgian officials report[ed] that Ossetian authorities [would] not confirm the number of casualties on their side’ (Freese 2004f).<sup>76</sup> Arguing for holding their positions in the Didi Liakhvi and Patara Liakhvi gorges, Saakashvili made an impassioned case for the need to protect Georgian villagers:

Shall we withdraw the hardware as some pacifists want us to do? Shall we withdraw our policemen from there? Whom shall we place our confidence in? [JPF commander Sviatoslav] Nabzdorov? Or those Russian officers who do everything to occupy all these territories? . . . [T]hey want to remove residents from the entire territory . . . [O]n the contrary, we will reinforce [Georgian villages] as much as possible . . . I say directly that we will not withdraw no matter how much they talk to us. These villages will be protected.<sup>77</sup>

*Moving towards war (1 August–13 August)*

In August, the escalation entered a new phase. On 1 August, Okruashvili declared that ‘[a]ll [Ossetian] attacks will be repelled, although we will not open fire first . . . [W]henver there is a provocation from their side, we will respond accordingly’.<sup>78</sup> On 9

<sup>71</sup>NTV Mir, 15 July 2004; ITAR-TASS, 13 July 2004; Imedi TV, 12, 15 and 19 July 2004; Rustavi-2 TV, 18 July 2004.

<sup>72</sup>NTV Mir, ITAR-TASS and Imedi TV, 15 July 2004.

<sup>73</sup>ITAR-TASS and Channel One TV, 16 July 2004; RTR Russia, 17 July 2004.

<sup>74</sup>Saakashvili justified his decision by drawing on Georgia’s experience in the 1992–1993 war in Abkhazia, noting that ‘once they made us withdraw our force from Gagra, and it ended badly. Then they made us withdraw our force from Sukhumi. We all know how it ended’ (Imedi TV, 20 July 2004).

<sup>75</sup>On these incidents, see Ekho Moskvyy Radio, 19 July 2004; RTR Russia TV, 18 July 2004; Kavkasia-Press, 23 July 2004; ITAR-TASS, 28 and 29 July 2004; Rustavi-2 TV, 28 July 2004; Tsentri-TV, 30 July 2004.

<sup>76</sup>Okruashvili announced that in one battle in Patara Liakhvi on 31 July, six Ossetians were killed (although the South Ossetian authorities denied this) (Kavkasia-Press, 1 August 2004; Interfax, 2 August 2004).

<sup>77</sup>Imedi TV and Rustavi-2 TV, 20 July 2004.

<sup>78</sup>Kavkasia-Press, 1 August 2004. A senior defence official later asserted that the soldiers who had gone to the region had received ‘very clear rules of engagement not to conduct offensive actions’. Soldiers were to use their weapons ‘only in case of a threat to [their] lives’ (author’s interview (anonymous), October 2004, Tbilisi).



August, Saakashvili said that interior forces were being withdrawn to make way for ‘a smaller but better trained contingent’, made up of troops who had graduated from the US-funded Georgian Train and Equip (GTEP) military assistance programme, established after 11 September 2001 to bolster Georgia’s counterterrorism abilities (German 2004; Giragosian 2004; Welt 2005b). These forces, Saakashvili said, were ‘far more disciplined and experienced, and they have been ordered not to return fire as much as possible’.<sup>79</sup> The South Ossetian JCC representative insisted that while Georgian army troops were entering the region, interior troops were still not leaving and between 2,000 and 3,000 Georgian forces continued to operate outside the confines of the peacekeeping mission.<sup>80</sup> Okruashvili admitted that the Georgian police presence in villages had been strengthened ‘to ensure the security of residents’.<sup>81</sup> According to another government minister interviewed after the events, Georgia inserted approximately 1,000 armed troops into South Ossetia in all, in addition to the 500-strong peacekeeping contingent.<sup>82</sup>

Exchanges of fire continued almost nightly from 5 to 13 August, threatening to turn the skirmish ‘into a full-scale conflict’ (Freese 2004g). Early on 11 August, Tskhinvali came under sustained fire. The next day, the Georgians accused the Ossetians of initiating a heavy attack on the villages of Didi Liakhvi and seeking ‘to take control of the bypass road’ that led to them. In the ensuing fire-fight, at least three Georgian soldiers were killed.<sup>83</sup> The Ossetian authorities argued that Georgians, including members of their peacekeeping contingent, were responsible, and that Georgian shelling had destroyed more than 50 homes, as well as a hospital and kindergarten in Tskhinvali. They also said that hundreds of new Georgian special forces and internal troops were massing at the South Ossetian border.<sup>84</sup> In turn, Georgian Prime Minister Zhvania argued that the Georgians were compelled to defend themselves against South Ossetian attacks aiming to block off Georgian villages in Didi Liakhvi because, if successful, these attacks would result in ‘large-scale ethnic cleansing’. Saakashvili added that the Georgian government would ‘do everything possible to ensure that civilians are protected and that no one can drive them out’.<sup>85</sup> Nonetheless, that day Georgian ‘women, children, and . . . elderly began to evacuate by car and on foot in large numbers, carrying only what they could in their hands’ (Freese 2004g). The next day, heavy artillery fire started up again in the direction of Eredvi, and the convoy of Prime Minister Zhvania, who had spent the night in the conflict zone, came under fire as it headed out of the region.<sup>86</sup> In response, Saakashvili warned that Georgians ‘have no illusions about the peace process . . . We of course should follow [it] but we will not make fools of ourselves. Only we can help ourselves. Every resident of our country

<sup>79</sup> *ITAR-TASS*, 9 August 2004; author’s interview (anonymous), October 2004, Tbilisi.

<sup>80</sup> *ITAR-TASS*, 5 and 6 August 2004.

<sup>81</sup> *Kavkasia-Press*, 6 August 2004.

<sup>82</sup> Author’s interview (anonymous), October 2004, Tbilisi.

<sup>83</sup> *Imedi TV*, 12 August 2004. Also see *ITAR-TASS* and *Agence France Press*, 12 August 2004; *Kommersant*, 13 August 2004.

<sup>84</sup> *RIA Novosti* and *Interfax*, 12 August 2004.

<sup>85</sup> *Imedi TV*, 12 August 2004. Also see *Rustavi-2 TV*, 13 August 2004.

<sup>86</sup> *RIA Novosti* and *Imedi TV*, 13 August 2004.

should know this . . . Impudence has its limits'.<sup>87</sup> That evening, Ossetian fire mortally wounded a Georgian soldier; the next day, Russian peacekeepers ceded control of a road leading to two Georgian villages to Ossetian troops.<sup>88</sup>

War finally approached as the defensive position of Georgian troops protecting villages and strategic passes became unsustainable. On 16 August, when two more Georgian soldiers lost their lives defending their positions, Okruashvili announced that Georgia had had enough and was prepared to go to war to protect its troops:

Until last night we exercised maximum restraint and did not take active retaliatory steps because we thought that there was still a chance for peace . . . [But] this is no longer a country that will turn a blind eye to the loss of life among its citizens.

While he announced that if a ceasefire held for three days, Georgia would begin to withdraw its soldiers, he also declared, 'I want to make clear that we are not going to abandon our positions and accept a situation where one or two of our soldiers are wounded or killed every day. This will have to end sooner or later'.<sup>89</sup>

Three days later, it did. After the death of another Georgian serviceman, the Georgian and South Ossetian authorities came to a peculiar understanding, blaming a mysterious 'third force' for disrupting the ceasefire and agreeing to take joint action against it.<sup>90</sup> Fire-fights continued, however, and on the night of 18–19 August, Georgian forces attacked and occupied strategic heights above Tskhinvali, reporting three Georgian fatalities and claiming that 'only Russians' had been on the heights, with eight Cossack volunteers killed.<sup>91</sup> This manoeuvre proved to be the last of the conflict. Saakashvili promptly insisted that Georgian forces did not wish to remain in their new positions as this could 'lead to the beginning of a major military conflict'. He agreed to hand over the heights to JPF control and to withdraw all Georgian troops from South Ossetia outside its 500-strong peacekeeping contingent.<sup>92</sup> If Georgian forces had not withdrawn, their new position would have greatly increased the threat to South Ossetians, leading to retaliatory attacks that almost certainly would have led to war.

#### *An anomalous trigger: escalation revisited*

Whatever Georgia's original intentions and motivations, its South Ossetian operation was marked by a process of security-dilemma escalation. This escalation appeared

<sup>87</sup>*Rustavi-2 TV*, 13 August 2004.

<sup>88</sup>*Rustavi-2 TV*, 14 August 2004.

<sup>89</sup>*Rustavi-2 TV*, 16 August 2004.

<sup>90</sup>On the 'third force', Georgian First Deputy Minister of Security Gigi Ugulava said that this consisted of Cossack volunteers and members of the North Ossetian peacekeeping battalion and that in using the phrase, the Georgian government was trying to 'leave the Ossetian side a way out'. In return, South Ossetia's *de facto* Minister of Defence Anatoly Barankevich said that Georgian troops were firing on each other (*ITAR-TASS*, *RIA Novosti*, *Interfax* and *Imedi TV*, 17 August 2004; *Georgian State Television Channel One* and *Rustavi-2 TV*, 18 August 2004). On Cossack involvement, also see *RIA Novosti* and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (Moscow), 18 August 2004.

<sup>91</sup>*Interfax*, *TASS* and *Rustavi-2 TV*, 19 August 2004.

<sup>92</sup>*TASS*, 19 August 2004.

mechanical, as Georgians and South Ossetians acted in fear of the other's intentions. By reducing the security of South Ossetians, Georgia increased the vulnerability of ethnic Georgians in the conflict zone, as well as that of the armed forces defending those civilians and Georgia's strategic positions. The more Georgia sought to defend its people and positions, the more threatening Georgian forces became to South Ossetians. The more the South Ossetians—backed by Russia—responded to this threat, the more they threatened Georgians, leading Georgia, in turn, to take actions that increased tensions even more. This increasingly unstable standoff threatened to collapse until the Georgians ultimately pulled back from war.

This interpretation of escalation moves seamlessly from Georgia's limited offensive intentions and South Ossetian (and Russian) uncertainty to a security dilemma: Georgia acted, South Ossetia (and Russia) reacted, and Georgia counter-reacted. The problem with this interpretation, however, is that the trigger for escalation is not as straightforward a catalyst as the discussion makes it seem. Georgia's deployment of special forces troops on 31 May, which visibly launched the action–reaction cycle of escalation, was not logically equivalent to the overall 'trigger' to escalation—Georgia's tightening of border controls with South Ossetia and increase of armed checkpoints within and around it. On the basis of these latter actions, and the Georgian intentions and motivations that produced it, escalation was not a foregone conclusion.

Georgia's deployment on 31 May was entirely avoidable. It was made in response to a verbal threat by Major-General Svyatoslav Nabzdorov, the Russian head of the JPF, to forcibly remove Georgia's initial anti-smuggling checkpoints, which Nabzdorov said contravened existing agreements.<sup>93</sup> It was highly unlikely, however, that Russian peacekeepers were going to attack the Georgian posts. For three of the four checkpoints, doing so would have required the use of force on indisputably Georgian territory, something which at the time was highly unlikely. Moreover, Nabzdorov was given to crude expressions unbecoming of a peacekeeper and probably did not intend his words to be taken so seriously. He subsequently denied any intention to dismantle the checkpoints by force, and gave direct reassurances that they would not be shut down.<sup>94</sup>

Georgian officials recognised almost immediately that they had over-reacted. Four days after the deployment, the two ministers who presided over the insertion of troops into the region, Minister of Internal Affairs Giorgi Baramidze and Minister of State Security Zurab Adeishvili, were removed from their positions: Baramidze became defence minister, presiding over troops that at that time had nothing to do with the conflict, while Adeishvili became prosecutor-general. Irakli Okruashvili, who had been serving as prosecutor-general after leaving the post of Shida Kartli governor, now became minister of internal affairs, in charge of police efforts around and in South Ossetia. Former national security advisor Ivane Merabishvili combined the posts of

<sup>93</sup>*Imedi TV*, 31 May 2004.

<sup>94</sup>*NTV Mir*, *RIA Novosti*, *ITAR-TASS*, *Imedi TV*, 31 May 2004. Speaking to the Georgian broadcast media during the conflict, Nabzdorov accused one channel in particular of 'showing all sorts of f\*\*king rubbish'. He continued using profanities to complain about their coverage of him personally (*Imedi TV*, 14 July 2004).

minister of state security and deputy prime minister with the curious official responsibility of coordinating efforts in South Ossetia.<sup>95</sup>

Merabishvili's new mandate was telling. A senior government official later identified one of the government's key mistakes in South Ossetia as a 'lack of coordination' among ministries and the absence of any central crisis management system. Whenever something bad happened, he said, everyone just 'ran to the [conflict zone]'.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, one OSCE military advisor referred to Georgia's move as a 'knee-jerk reaction', flying and bussing in as many armed personnel as possible in response to Nabzdorov's threat to 'grind the police into dust', daring him to 'try it'.<sup>97</sup> By this reading, the insertion of troops on 31 May was an exaggerated and disorganised response of the Georgian government to an insignificant threat, not the rational reaction of an insecure actor wary of an opponent's intentions.

This blunder triggered the subsequent escalation, albeit now in psychologically predictable fashion. In a classic study on misperception in international politics, Robert Jervis has suggested that actors 'tend to see the behaviour of others as more centralized, disciplined, and coordinated than it is' (Jervis 1968, p. 475).<sup>98</sup> Confronted with evidence of hostile intent, actors are unlikely to attribute it to accident or disorganisation. This occurred in the aftermath of the 31 May deployment. Viewed by South Ossetians (and Russians) as evidence of hostile intent, the deployment stood in sharp contrast to Georgia's stated defensive security-seeking strategy toward South Ossetia and even Georgia's actual limited offensive intentions. The inference that the South Ossetians (and Russians) drew was that Georgia was considering full-scale offensive action in South Ossetia—not that its government was disorganised and prone to over-reaction. Their subsequent escalation was premised on this inference of hostile intent and not (as a purely structural security dilemma explanation would have it) on a more ambiguous concern about the offensive implications of new border monitoring and police checkpoints.

That 31 May was a blunder also explains Georgia's counter-reaction to the South Ossetian and Russian moves. Jervis' study on misperceptions presents two arguments pertinent to Georgia's counter-reaction. First, 'actors often do not realize that actions intended to project a given image may not have the desired effect because the actions themselves do not turn out as planned'. Also, since policymakers

are aware of what is to them the important pattern in their actions, they often feel that the pattern will be equally obvious to others, and they overlook the degree to which the message is apparent to them only because they know what to look for. (Jervis 1968, p. 474)

In line with these assertions, Georgia discounted the possibility that the 31 May deployment had distorted South Ossetian and Russian perceptions of its intentions. Knowing that 31 May was a blunder, and that they were not intending full-scale offensive action, the Georgians interpreted South Ossetian and Russian actions on this

<sup>95</sup>*Rustavi-2*, 7 June 2004.

<sup>96</sup>Author's interview (anonymous), October 2004, Tbilisi.

<sup>97</sup>Briefing by OSCE military advisor, OSCE Mission to Georgia (Tskhinvali office), October 2004.

<sup>98</sup>See also Jervis (1976, pp. 319–42).

basis, rather than on the possibility that its opponents took 31 May as a serious signal of offensive military intent. Consequently, Georgia interpreted its opponents' response as purely offensive and wholly disproportionate to Georgia's own blundering actions. While Georgia knew that it was making at least the South Ossetian leadership insecure, it still perceived that it was doing so non-violently, while the South Ossetian leadership was now threatening violence and ethnic cleansing in response. To Georgia, this demonstrated the South Ossetian regime's aggressive nature, retroactively justifying its intent to depose the regime and leading it to new efforts of deterrence and heightened defence. As for Russia, Georgians would have been hard-pressed to consider Russian diplomatic and military efforts to deter even a full-scale offensive in South Ossetia—*de jure* Georgian territory—to be legitimate, let alone driven somehow by Russian insecurity. Therefore they could hardly perceive Russian deterrence of non-violent plans of regime change in the region as legitimate and security-driven. Failing to interpret Russia's armed response as an outgrowth of Georgia's 31 May misleading signal of offensive military intent, Georgia perceived it to be the unambiguous act of an aggressor.

The Georgian leadership's minimisation of the threatening nature of its 31 May operation was bolstered by yet another misperception that provides a twist to another of Jervis' proposals. Jervis noted that 'when the behavior of the other is undesired, it is usually seen as derived from internal forces . . . and not by its reaction to the first side' (Jervis 1968, p. 476). He argued that this perception contributes to escalation because an actor wrongly perceives or overestimates an opponent's 'innate' aggressive behaviour and reacts accordingly. This observation probably helps explain the escalation between Georgia and South Ossetian authorities. One Georgian minister later reflected that the assumption that South Ossetians were preparing to attack Georgian villagers was probably incorrect. While insisting that 'we couldn't leave the Georgian population vulnerable', he concluded that 'we could have stopped [the Ossetians]' without inserting so many troops. They 'would not have attacked the peaceful population', he reasoned; 'It was not in their interests'.<sup>99</sup>

However, the misperception operated in a different manner with regard to another relevant actor—the Ossetian population at large. As mentioned, Georgia's strategy depended in large part on the unlikely premise that the South Ossetian population would eagerly rise up against its leadership given an appropriate excuse and opportunity, such as the economic blockade of the region. Viewing their actions as short-term and motivated by good intentions, Georgians were unaware of or wilfully amnesiac in relation to South Ossetian perceptions equating Georgian blockades to the Georgian–South Ossetian conflict of the early 1990s and did not see how they would create far more suspicion than support among South Ossetians.<sup>100</sup> Tea Tutberidze, a leader of the Georgian youth organisation *Kmara* that was active at the time in South Ossetia, understood how government policy was failing: 'Right now,

<sup>99</sup>Author's interview (anonymous), October 2004, Tbilisi.

<sup>100</sup>Ossetians observed that a visit to the region by the Georgian first lady, Sandra Roelofs, at the time of escalation 'reminded them of how the first Georgian–Ossetian conflict got started [in 1989.] They fear[ed] that Georgian troops, carrying banners of peace, [would] once again march into Tskhinvali' (Freese 2004f).

Ossetians are calling this the “humanitarian invasion”. Rather than coming in with cameras and a big entourage, authorities need to enter with genuine support. If they are sincere, information will spread quickly and Ossetians might support the initiatives’ (Freese 2004c). One minister interviewed after the fact acknowledged that rather than win Ossetians over, Georgian activities had ‘irritated’ the Ossetian population. Though the government had been aware that its ‘anti-smuggling’ measures would negatively impact the local population, dependent on trade and freedom of movement, he also believed that Georgians had underestimated South Ossetians’ ‘collective paranoia’—something that the 31 May deployment only fed.<sup>101</sup>

When, at the time, Ossetian support was not forthcoming, the Georgian leadership concluded that this was because the South Ossetian authorities were forcing the population to resist. Thus, while Georgians followed Jervis’ script in misperceiving that ‘undesired behavior’ (popular South Ossetian resistance) was generated internally (by leadership pressure) rather than by Georgia’s actions, this led them to underestimate rather than overestimate the hostility of most South Ossetians. This overly rosy view of the local population obscured for authorities the danger of escalation.

To conclude, armed conflict was not a predictable outcome of Georgia’s initial actions. Alone, the closure of roads into and out of South Ossetia, the establishment of traffic checkpoints in the conflict zone, and a limited deployment of police in Georgian-populated villages might have ratcheted up tensions and even given rise to minor confrontation. However, while Georgian success in deposing the South Ossetian regime was by no means given (and probably unlikely), it is also not evident that a more limited deployment would have led to the escalation that actually occurred. If Georgia had maintained a more limited incursion, the South Ossetian leadership would have been far less likely to take a decision to threaten Georgian-populated villages or otherwise go on a war footing, and Russia would not have been so extreme in its diplomatic warnings or so ready to transit weaponry to South Ossetia.<sup>102</sup> Conflict, thus, was not solely the product of a ‘structural’ security dilemma, inherent in

<sup>101</sup> Author’s interview (anonymous), October 2004, Tbilisi.

<sup>102</sup> A pertinent question is whether a restrained Russian response would just have reduced the likelihood of escalation or actually enabled Georgia to topple the government in South Ossetia. Before the summer, Georgia had been highly optimistic that Russia would allow Tbilisi to re-establish control over South Ossetia without resistance. A senior government official explained that the lesson of Russia’s lack of obstructive reaction in the Rose Revolution and, in a more direct parallel, its facilitation of Aslan Abashidze’s removal from Adjara, was that if Russia were presented with a similar ‘*fait accompli*’ in South Ossetia, it would back down. A Georgian diplomat asserted that before the conflict erupted, even US officials ‘had a sense’ through their conversations with Russian counterparts that Russia would permit Georgia to re-establish control over South Ossetia, while digging in further in Abkhazia—a region Russia had greater economic and strategic interests in controlling. ‘We didn’t think Russia would be so active’, lamented one senior government official. As it turned out, Russia was unwilling to retreat from South Ossetia, probably because the Kremlin realised that if the Georgian government was victorious in South Ossetia, it would be supremely confident (following the Rose Revolution and the victory in Adjara) and would not be able to resist trying to retake Abkhazia as well. That same diplomat conceded this was a possibility: ‘I guarantee you’, he said, that such a scenario would have unfolded ‘the next day’ (author’s interviews (anonymous), September and October 2004, Washington, DC and Tbilisi).

the nature of anarchic relations and exacerbated by features of internal conflict. It arose out of the interaction of permissible structural conditions with a specific blunder—a misleading signal of offensive military intent—and cognitive misperceptions that either flowed from that action or minimised its impact.

*A security dilemma in 2008?*

By August 2008, the local territorial gains that Georgia had achieved four years before were impressively consolidated, with even the JPF acknowledging Georgian-controlled territories within South Ossetia.<sup>103</sup> Politically, however, the prospects for conflict were dimmer than ever, as Russia took a series of measures to formalise the status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as economic and security protectorates, heightening Georgia's insecurity with regard to its territorial integrity. When the war broke out in August, South Ossetians, together with Russia, again accused Georgia of implementing a plan to take control of South Ossetia by force. Georgians insisted, in turn, that the South Ossetians and Russia were the ones implementing the final phase of their own plan to seize all South Ossetia, including Georgian-controlled villages and positions.

As in 2004, however, an explanation for conflict that presumes ambitious war plans on either side is not necessarily correct. While the origins of the 2008 war must be further investigated, an initial glance at the escalation that led to the Tskhinvali offensive is consistent with an explanation grounded in the security dilemma.

Unlike in 2004, the trigger for escalation remains hazy. Despite a considerable rise in tensions since 2004, it still remains unclear whether either Russia or Georgia was making a specific effort to change (or forestall a change to) the status quo in the region in the first half of 2008.<sup>104</sup> Unexplained exchanges of fire between Tskhinvali and Georgian villages occurred in mid-June, resulting in the death of one Ossetian.<sup>105</sup> A more immediate trigger for escalation was a pair of bomb attacks at the start of July. The first killed the local Ossetian head of police of a Tskhinvali suburb, an individual who Georgian officials had once tagged as the leader of an 'illegal armed formation'.<sup>106</sup> The second was an apparent assassination attempt against the Georgian-backed 'alternative' president of South Ossetia, Dmitry Sanakoev, who since 2006 enjoyed authority over Georgian-controlled areas within South Ossetia.<sup>107</sup> South Ossetians (and Russians) accused Georgia of killing the policeman and of staging the attack on Sanakoev. Georgia blamed internal Ossetian power struggles for

<sup>103</sup>For the map, see International Crisis Group (2007, p. 28).

<sup>104</sup>Though for the case against Russia, see Illarionov (2009) and Felgenhauer (2009).

<sup>105</sup>*ITAR-TASS*, 15 June 2008; 'One Dies, Four Injured in S. Ossetia Shootout', *Civil.ge Daily News Online* (Tbilisi), 16 June 2008, available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=18548&search=>, accessed November 2008.

<sup>106</sup>'Georgian Policemen, Civilians Detained in South Ossetia', *Civil.ge*, 6 December 2005, available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=11280&search=>, accessed November 2008.

<sup>107</sup>'Three Injured in Attack on Georgian Convoy in S. Ossetia', *Civil.ge*, 3 July 2008, available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=18674&search=>, both sites accessed November 2008.

the policeman's death (as they had past bomb attacks) and accused the South Ossetian authorities of targeting their political adversary.

Regardless of how the conflict began, and to what end, the cycle of reaction and counter-reaction that ensued is consistent with a security dilemma explanation. New vulnerabilities (the attack on Sanakoev's convoy) led Georgians to take measures to increase their security which threatened South Ossetians, who responded (with Russian assistance) in ways that further decreased Georgian security. The attack on Sanakoev led Georgia to establish new positions on the heights above the bypass road where his convoy had been attacked. The bomb attacks also led to several days of tit-for-tat shootouts, shellings, and arrests, with three Ossetians reported killed. Georgia eventually threatened to use force to free four soldiers that the South Ossetian authorities had detained.<sup>108</sup>

This threat led to a number of Russian actions plausibly intended to deter Georgia from using force against South Ossetia. These included violating Georgian airspace over South Ossetia, as well as having various military divisions announce their preparation to support Russian peacekeepers in the event of an escalation of conflict.<sup>109</sup> At the same time, from mid-July, Russia held scheduled military exercises with thousands of troops near the Georgian border. The troops did not leave the area after the exercises concluded but instead camped near the frontier crossing into South Ossetia a few kilometres away from the Roki tunnel (Felgenhauer 2008).

The next stage of escalation appears to have been sparked by South Ossetian efforts to retake the strategic heights that Georgia occupied at the start of the month. At the end of July, a new series of shootouts and shellings between Georgian and Ossetian-controlled villages and positions ensued, culminating on 1 August with a roadside bomb attack on a Georgian police vehicle. This sparked more exchanges of fire and heavy shelling between Tskhinvali and Georgian-controlled villages to its south and east, with six more Ossetians killed.<sup>110</sup>

As a result of these clashes, South Ossetians came to embrace openly offensive intentions. Local authorities first warned they would announce a general mobilisation and appeal for assistance from volunteers from the North Caucasus to defend against Georgian aggression. They also announced the start of an evacuation of children and

<sup>108</sup>*Interfax*, 3 July 2008; 'Two Killed in Overnight Shelling in S. Ossetia', *Civil.ge*, 4 July 2008, available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=18677&search=>; *Georgian State Television Channel One*, 8 July 2008, accessed November 2008.

<sup>109</sup>Press Release, 'Russian MFA Information and Press Department Commentary Concerning the Situation in South Ossetia', Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 10 July 2008, available at: [http://www.in.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/d87cf4c1a75524e3c3257483001c43af?OpenDocument](http://www.in.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/d87cf4c1a75524e3c3257483001c43af?OpenDocument); *Interfax*, 10 July 2008; Press Release, 'Komandovaniem KSPM prinyati mery po povysheniyu boevoi gotovnosti podrazdelenei rossiiskogo mirotvorcheskogo kontingenta', Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 11 July 2008; available at: <http://www.mil.ru/info/1069/details/index.shtml?id=47094>; *Interfax*, 4 August 2008; all sites accessed November 2008.

<sup>110</sup>'MIA: Five Policemen Injured in S. Ossetia Blast', *Civil.ge*, 1 August 2008, available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=18868&search=>; 'Six Die in S. Ossetia Shootout', *Civil.ge*, 2 August 2008, available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=18871&search=>, all sites accessed November 2008.



women from Tskhinvali.<sup>111</sup> Finally, on 4 August, they issued an ultimatum that signalled a major change in the status quo of the last four years: that Georgia should withdraw all its armed forces from South Ossetia, including from the territories it had ‘occupied’. While potentially referring only to non-peacekeeping forces, and ostensibly in reaction to what South Ossetians perceived as Georgia’s latest efforts to change the status quo, South Ossetians had tacitly accepted these forces for four years. Now, Kokoit'i warned that ‘we shall take the most decisive measures in order to resolve this problem for good’ if Georgians did not stand down.<sup>112</sup>

In light of Kokoit'i's threat, we can say that the war had begun already in the afternoon of 6 August, a day and a half before the Georgian offensive on Tskhinvali. By the South Ossetians’ own admission, fighting broke out as they sought to remove Georgian troops from positions they had occupied on heights southwest of Tskhinvali. Fire-fights and shellings there and to the east of Tskhinvali raged through the night and again the following morning. In the afternoon of 7 August, the first Georgian fatalities of the conflict were reported, two peacekeepers and eight civilians, while South Ossetians reported two more deaths.<sup>113</sup>

The final steps to the Tskhinvali offensive consisted of what appears to have been mutual deterrence failure between Georgia and, finally, Russia directly. In the early afternoon, Georgia mobilised its forces and weaponry stationed tens of kilometres away from Tskhinvali (including forces that had arrived from western Georgia) and brought them close to the region; a few hours later, the Georgian government declared a unilateral ceasefire.<sup>114</sup> Georgians say that this combination of stick and soft talk was intended to deter South Ossetians from further attacks while giving another opportunity for negotiations to succeed. Their mobilisation, however, appears to have sparked a mobilisation of the regular Russian army troops located on the other side of the Roki tunnel, plausibly Russia’s own last-ditch effort to deter Georgia from launching a full offensive on South Ossetia.

The Georgians appear to have feared the worst from this Russian mobilisation. Georgian officials report that by 11:30 that night they were receiving intelligence that over 100 military vehicles were crossing through the tunnel. They explain that this development, along with earlier reported troop crossings, a remark earlier that day by the Russian commander of the JPF that the South Ossetians were uncontrollable, and renewed attacks on Georgian villages after the unilateral ceasefire was declared, all led them to fear that Russia was supporting a fully fledged effort by South Ossetia to drive Georgia out of the region. Georgian officials say the ensuing operation had the objectives of neutralising the firing positions of the Ossetians and stopping the

<sup>111</sup> *ITAR-TASS*, 2 August 2008; *RIA Novosti*, 5 August 2008, accessed November 2008.

<sup>112</sup> *Interfax*, 4 August 2008.

<sup>113</sup> *Interfax* and *ITAR-TASS*, 6 August 2008; ‘“Intensive Shootout” Reported in S. Ossetia’, *Civil.ge*, 6 August 2008, available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=18909&search=>; ‘Source: About 10 Georgians Dead in S. Ossetia Clashes’, *Civil.ge*, 7 August 2008, available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=18933&search=>; ‘Reports: Two Die in S. Ossetian Village’, *Civil.ge*, 7 August 2008, available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=18936&search=>, all sites accessed November 2008.

<sup>114</sup> *Interfax* and *Rustavi-2 TV*, 7 August 2008.

incoming Russian troops from reaching the town.<sup>115</sup> While the Tskhinvali offensive appeared to fulfil the first objective, the failure to destroy a bridge north of Tskhinvali in timely fashion doomed the second. The Russian response to the offensive, especially after the attack on their column above Tskhinvali, was massive, and the Russo-Georgian war had begun.

If this version of events accurately represents the build-up to war, August 2008 was a more extreme version of the war that was averted in August 2004. Neither Georgians nor Ossetians (nor Russians) really wanted war, but they worried about the other side's offensive intentions and even believed the other side really did seek war. Significantly, both Georgians and Ossetians were now more capable of quickly and intensively defending their positions and taking offensive action to defend their security than in 2004. In 2008 the sides may not have been seeking war, but unlike in 2004 they were at least preparing for it.

At the same time, why war still seemed unlikely in 2008 is also part of the legacy of 2004. Assuming continued Russian determination to keep Georgia from establishing control over South Ossetia, avoiding war in August 2008 ultimately required Georgian restraint—something that depended on Georgians believing they had something to gain from the absence of war and that a war that engaged Russia invited disaster. These lessons should still have been sufficiently relevant in 2008 to again prompt Georgian restraint.

Upon closer inspection, however, at least two differences emerge. First, restraint, far from consolidating existing gains, suggested to Georgians in 2008 a very high chance of losing the gains they had made in South Ossetia since 2004. By 7 August, Georgian officials appear to have believed they were witnessing a process of Russian military occupation of South Ossetia. Second, Georgians appear to have gained new confidence that their military could successfully take on the Russians, at least by staving off their entrance into Tskhinvali, while sadly underestimating Russia's will to escalate the conflict to full inter-state war. Heightened perceptions of threat and false optimism thus appear to have led to Georgia's Tskhinvali offensive and the unintended consequences that followed. Regardless of how escalation began in the summer of 2008, the spiral to war adheres to the logic of the security dilemma.

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<sup>115</sup> Author's interview with a Georgian diplomat (anonymous), October 2008, Washington, DC. Also see, for example, 'National Security Council Chief Testifies Before War Commission', *Civil.ge*, 28 October 2008, available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=19845&search=commission%20lomaia>, accessed November 2008. English-language translations of all official testimony to the Georgian *ad hoc* parliamentary commission that investigated the war are available at: [http://www.parliament.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=1329](http://www.parliament.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=1329), accessed November 2008.

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