

# Behind The Lines!

Autumn 2008

## PROGNOSIS: SIX MONTHS TO A YEAR?

What is it about October that evokes political tensions across the international spectrum, the imminent U.S. presidential election and current worldwide financial crisis notwithstanding? Vice presidential candidate Joe Biden avers that Barack Obama will be tested by an international crisis within the first six months of his presidency, if elected. This is not a measure of Biden's prescient powers, but rather the stark reality of a coming major military challenge that the United States will face early in the term of the next president. Those who wish to do us harm have waited patiently for the U.S. interregnum that will begin in January 2009. The first critical test of U.S. resolve will come from one or several of the following international players, perhaps even simultaneously, who will seek to exploit the lingering military tensions left by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the unsettling political vacuum still reverberating around the world from the collapse of the Soviet Union.

### RUSSIA AND THE NEAR ABROAD:

Against the backdrop of the 2008 Summer Olympic Games with their spirit and legacy of peaceful competition on the sports field rather than the battlefield, Russia's Putin unleashed an obscene military attack on his sovereign neighbor Georgia. Despite the claim that South Ossetia and Abkhazia are *de facto*, independent enclaves within Georgia, they are recognized as *de jure* sovereign territories of Georgia under international law. The swift movement of Russian ground and armor forces from the 58<sup>th</sup> Army in Vladikavkaz and the deployment of sizeable naval forces from the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol attest to the pre-planned nature of the overwhelming Russian invasion. Inasmuch as the "five-day war" as it is derisively referred to in the Russian government media occurred in Georgia, the real target is Ukraine and its movement towards NATO membership. In the days to come Russia will pursue an aggressive strategy through covert operations and ultimately may intervene with military force to split Ukraine along the political fault line that divides pro-Russian eastern Ukraine from the pro-European western half of the country. Similarly, the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as Moldova, have all been put on notice by Russia's precipitate actions in Georgia. The Operational Group of Russian Forces in Moldova (former 14<sup>th</sup> Guards Army) is stationed on sovereign Moldovan territory in the separatist eastern rump called Transnistria (Pridnestrovie). These forces may provide the pretense for Russian military intervention and eventual occupation of Moldova in the name of protecting the sizeable Russian citizenry there. Putin would use Russia's role as the major supplier of natural gas to Western Europe as leverage to discourage any substantive resistance by either NATO or the European Union. Ultimately, U.S. military power may be required to blunt the aggressive ambitions of a resurgent Russia meddling here and elsewhere in two hemispheres.

### THE MIDDLE EAST AND SOUTH ASIA:

These two volatile regions represent the greatest immediate threat to U.S. national security. They remain the most likely arena for combat operations involving American forces. Despite low-level sanctions and "polite" diplomacy by the Western powers, Ahmadinejad will continue to deny international inspection of Iran's nuclear facilities and probe for American weaknesses vis-à-vis Iraq and Israel. Eventually Iran will precipitate a crisis that will test U.S. resolve in the region and the U.S. response would likely be a blockade of Iranian waters. Since a blockade is an act of war, Iran would no doubt retaliate. When diplomacy predictably fails, there will be a swift and devastating air attack on Iranian nuclear facilities and key military objectives. Farther east the threat from Taliban and al-Qaeda elements on the Afghan-Pakistani border poses a continuing challenge to U.S. interests in this region. Political unrest in Pakistan, along with festering animosities between India and Pakistan that could flare into open warfare at any time, does not augur well for peace in this part of the continent as well. Waziristan is the likely flashpoint.

### PEOPLES REPUBLIC OF CHINA (PRC) AND TAIWAN

Following the propaganda dividends which accrued as the host of the 2008 Summer Olympics, the PRC will now turn its focused attention on Taiwan, which it asserts is a legitimate province of the mainland. Not surprisingly it will take its cue from the successful Russian military operation in Georgia and the rather benign response of the United States and the European Union to begin reviewing its plans and options for returning Taiwan to the PRC. Indeed, Russia and the PRC may be signatories to a secret mutual "non-aggression pact" that allows Russia to pursue its interests in Eastern Europe, while the PRC fulfills its dream of restoring historic China in the Pacific Rim. Taiwan will be the first major test in East Asia.

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