
Abkhazia Violence And Regional Redefinition

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There has been a recent uptick in violence in the Georgian secessionist region of Abkhazia, with six people suffering injuries June 30 when two small bombs went off in trash bins in a parking lot across the street from a market in the Abkhaz capital of Sukhumi. On the previous day, another six people were injured when two small bombs exploded in the Abkhaz Black Sea resort city of Gagra. Abkhaz authorities immediately blamed Georgians for the attacks, and they quickly announced that the border between Georgia and Abkhazia would close July 1 in response.

Violence and random attacks occur frequently inside Abkhazia and across the border in Georgia proper. This sudden spike in violence is most likely not random, but an attempt by the Abkhaz to sabotage a new opening of Georgia-Russia negotiations. Georgia has two separatist enclaves, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, that achieved de facto independence in 1993 and have benefited from Russian protection - including the presence of Russian peacekeepers - ever since. Abkhazia is the more militant of the two.

Tensions have been high in the region for many years, with Russia using its presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to push back on Georgia, which has been pro-Western since its Rose Revolution in 2005 - much to Russia's ire. Since then, the West (mainly the United States) has seen Georgia as its closest ally in the region. Over the past few years, a series of militant and military squabbles has escalated the situation. In addition, Russia has increased its troop presence in Abkhazia, and Georgia has sought NATO membership as part of the West's overall protection. But Tbilisi has learned in the past year that the West has much more significant issues on its plate. The European Union is in internal chaos over the Lisbon Treaty, and the United States is bogged down with Iran and Iraq.

Moreover, Georgia has felt increasingly isolated by the West's abandonment in the face of Russia's growing aggression. In the past month, it has also seen a symbolic consolidation of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan with Russia. New Russian President Dmitri Medvedev has met with the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders at least twice in the past month, and another trip to Baku is slated for the week of June 30. Unless it wants to commit geopolitical suicide by taking on Russia by itself, Georgia now has only one real option: It must strike a deal with Moscow. One is already on the table, according to leaks in the media. It includes the Georgians partitioning Abkhazia and allowing refugee Georgians, who fled in the early 1990s during the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, to return. But Russia has nixed this deal outright.

According to Stratfor sources, however, there is another deal in the works. It would allow Georgian refugees to return to a small section in Abkhazia just north of Gali in exchange for the Kodori Gorge region, the only part of Abkhazia that is under Georgian control. This deal could actually work for both the Abkhaz and the Georgians in that both get back a small sliver of what they claim as their territory. Georgia might be comfortable giving up Kodori because it includes a small ethnic group called the Svars-fierce fighters who are pro-Georgian - who would be capable of keeping watch on Abkhaz and Russians in the region for Tbilisi. But the deal has to go through Russia, which has its own hook: It wants Tbilisi to renounce its bid for NATO membership. The Georgians could go along with such a demand, since they know the West currently has little interest in their country. Georgia also knows that a deal with Moscow could be broken in the future, just as others have been broken in the past.

But in this case, the details do not really matter. Whether Tbilisi accepts this deal or another also matters less than what this situation says about the overall power play that is unfolding. Russia has resumed its authority. The fact that Georgia might be scrambling for a deal before a crisis erupts marks the return of Russian authority, and a redefinition of the balance of power in the region. Currently, the West does not have the wherewithal to confront Russia. If it did, a defining confrontation would have unfolded. The West has passed on that opportunity, leaving Georgia to fly solo and at the mercy of Russian will. But this inaction signals a greater understanding by the West - that Russia's power will not remain in Georgia, but expand to other regions and beyond.- Stratfor
