
Russia's Position In The Caucasus

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<http://en.fondsk.ru/article.php?id=1483> - 16/7/2008

The situation in the Caucasus is extremely tense. Clearly, the UN mission dispatched to deal with the conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia has been a spectacular failure. Georgia does not comply with the recent UN Security Council resolutions. Troops have not been withdrawn from the Kodori Gorge.

Instead, the Georgian Interior Ministry is building up its forces in the zone. Downright criminals are being involved in sabotage in the Abkhazian territory.

As for the political aspect of the situation, the positions of the sides concerning the so-called frozen conflicts have diverged even further.

Georgia's current offers to recognize Abkhazia in case the Georgian constitution changes in the future and to return refugees to the Gali region regardless of the consequences of the move are unrealistic.

The resolution of conflicts around the de facto Republics in the post-Soviet space increasingly draws international attention. The internationalization of the settlement process so widely discussed in Tbilisi is already an accomplished fact. This is quite explainable: throughout the past five years, Georgia has been making efforts to change the format of Russia's presence in the Caucasus.

It is unlikely that Saakashvili is able to unleash another round of war.

Last April, he allegedly presented a plan of seizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia entitled Doublet at a secret meeting with his army and police chiefs. Tentatively, the leak about the secret plan was meant to exert psychological pressure on Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the peacekeepers.

However, there is a range of reasons why a war is not in Georgia's interests. It would be difficult to endure, and the result would be an indefinite delay of the conflict resolution in Georgia's favor, while its domestic stability would be jeopardized by the very first fatalities.

Experts (A. Khramchikhin in particular) think that Georgia's military superiority by a factor of 4-5 over the forces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (even taken separately) is a total myth.

No exact assessments of the military capabilities of the two breakaway regions are available, but in all likelihood they are just slightly inferior to those of Georgia. The quantities of weaponry Russia has transferred to Abkhazia and South Ossetia since 1993 are unknown. Over past several years, Georgia has been supplied with weaponry on a large scale by Ukraine, Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, and Turkey. The scandal that erupted when 40 BMP-2 armored personal carriers were obtained by Georgia from Ukraine in 2005 is not over yet. In an armed conflict, Abkhazians and South Ossetians would be defending their homes and thus be more motivated than Georgian soldiers fighting "to restore the territorial integrity". Unlike Georgians, the populations of the breakaway regions would not have to seize "enemy territory".

The possibility that weapons would be supplied to the autonomies by Russia is a definite advantage of their positions.

Tbilisi adopted different approaches to South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Since 2004, the Georgian leadership has been reckoning that a departure from the status quo in the conflict zones is the optimal way of reintegrating Georgia. This departure should make it possible to internationalize the conflicts. Saakashvili seeks to transform the conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia into one between Georgia and Russia. Tbilisi concluded in 2004 and continues to believe that unlike Abkhazia South Ossetia is a "weak link" in the chain of its problems. In contrast to Abkhazia where the Inguri River has become a natural border between two ethnic communities, Georgian and Ossetian villages in South Ossetia are territorially mixed, plus there are zones there which have never been under the separatist government's control. Hence the hope to have the "Ossetian issue" resolved easily and in a short term. In reality, the "short term" has already extended over 4 years. True enough, the status quo in the conflict zone has been destroyed over the period of time completely.

Even though the resumed armed hostilities did not last long (in 2004), the minimal level of security achieved thanks to the Dagomys agreements is now a matter of the past. Over the last 4 years, shootings and provocations have become every-day reality, and now the zone is patrolled not only by adults but also by high-school students. Tskhinvali has seen a tide of suspiciousness, spy mania, and intolerance to the opponents of the authority (nevertheless, the population of South Ossetia remains united in its drive for independence).

S. Markedonov, one of Russia's top Caucasus experts, writes that South Ossetia became the region which ruined Saakashvili's quick "reintegration" plans already in 2004. For Saakashvili, the failure of the snap offensive targeting Tskhinvali signified the end of illusions that the "restoration of the territorial integrity" would be a rapid process.

The conflict in South Ossetia was the first frozen one in Eurasia to be "thawed" in the political, legal, and military senses. The results are immediately obvious. The legal framework of the ceasefire and the peace process stopped to exist. A project of an "alternative South Ossetia" with Sanakoyev as the pro-Georgian Ossetian leader was launched, but Sanakoyev is not an independent actor in the conflict from the military standpoint. Sanakoev and his provisional administration are a project meant to leave Tskhinvali with no representative status in the negotiations.

A de facto partition of South Ossetia has already taken place. Over the 4 years, Georgian and Ossetian villages have developed their own transit, military, economic, and administrative infrastructures linking them either to Tbilisi or to Vladikavkaz and Moscow. D. Sanakoev has toured Brussels and other European capitals and meets with European and US diplomats, while President of the unrecognized South Ossetia E. Kokoity is portrayed as "the Kremlin's puppet" and "an instrument of Russia's annexionist plans".

As a result of the un-freezing, the Joint Control Commission on Settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian Conflict held only one meaningful meeting (in Tbilisi last October). Then, in March, 2008 Georgian State Minister for Reintegration Temur Yakobashvili said that its potential had been exhausted and a new settlement format was needed.

Clashes entailing civilian fatalities, at times among women and children, resumed after the un-freezing. An 18-year-old resident was killed when Tskhinvali came under artillery fire on June 15, 2008. A part of the South-Ossetian peacekeeping battalion refused to obey the Joint Control Commission on Settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian Conflict after the seizure of the Sarabuki village.

At present, Russia's position in South Ossetia should be based on the following principles. The disrupted negotiation process must be revived (without discussions of the status issue) and an agreement on not using force in the conflict zone (by all sides) must be prepared. A meaningful discussion of the future status of the conflict region would become possible only when the incessant shootings and provocations end. Any negotiations (or deals) are impossible while shellings of the capital of South Ossetia continue.

In Abkhazia, Tbilisi does not dare to violate the 1994 Moscow agreements with the same cynicism as the 1992 Dagomys agreements concerning South Ossetia. At the same time, Georgia invades Abkhazia's air space on a regular basis, which it should not do since the space is under international control exercised by the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG).

It is clear that the recent episode in which a Georgian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) was shot down was used by Tbilisi as a pretext to launch a propaganda campaign and to present itself internationally as the victim of a Russian aggression. But the very fact that this was the seventh of Georgia's Israeli-made Silver Arrow UAVs to be shot down merits attention.

On July 9, the Russian Foreign Ministry made an extremely harsh statement concerning the escalation of the situation in the zones of the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts. Two people were killed and six injured during a massive mortar attack on Tskhinvali in the night of July 4, 2008. The air space invasions by Georgian air forces became regular.

A strategic height near the Sarabuki village was taken by the Georgian forces and additional heavy weaponry was dispatched by Georgia to the region. Having mentioned a series of recent blasts in Abkhazian towns and the fact that Abkhazia regards them as terrorist acts, the Russian Foreign Ministry said openly that there were indications that Georgia had been involved in some of the cases.

Saakashvili has already offered his version of a settlement plan to Moscow.

It includes a partition of Abkhazia into influence zones - a larger Russian and a relatively small Georgian one - with Georgia's formal sovereignty over the entire territory of the former Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic.

The initiative reflects the Georgian vision of the peace plan discussed by Abkhazian President S. Bagapsh and Georgian Ambassador to the UN Irakli Alasania in Sukhumi this May. A part of the plan is the agreement not to use force in the conflict zone in return for Tbilisi's consent to pull its armed forces out of the Upper Kodori Gorge and Sukhumi's guarantees not to obstruct the return of refugees to the Gali and Ochamchira districts, plus the

replacement of Russian peacekeepers by a joint Georgian-Abkhazian police force.

The plan implies a de facto partition of Abkhazia into two spheres of influence by Russia and Georgia. Currently the border between Georgia and Abkhazia coincides with the Inguri River along which the Russian peacekeepers' checkpoints are sited. According to the plan, the border must shift northward and pass along the Kodori River.

The zone north of the Kodori is to remain under the control of the Abkhazian authority. Tbilisi will not insist on the return of refugees to the region as such a possibility is decisively opposed by Sukhumi. Besides, Georgia can agree to the deployment of Russian troops north of the Kodori River. As another part of the plan, Tbilisi suggests that Moscow abolishes the decrees establishing special relations between Russia and Abkhazia issued by V.

Putin on April 15, 2008.

Politically, the plan stipulates legal foundations for Abkhazia's broad autonomy within a unitary Georgia. In fact, it means preserving the status quo in the area north of the Kodori River. However, the very next day the plan was dropped by Saakashvili.

Tbilisi's plan stems from the UN General Assembly's resolution on the refugees from Abkhazia. From Sukhumi's point of view, the resolution was adopted on the basis of biased and even provocational materials supplied solely by the Georgian side. The UN resolution stresses the importance of protecting the property rights of refugees and displaced persons from Abkhazia. It was supported by 13 countries: Albany, Azerbaijan, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden, the US, and Ukraine. A total of 105 countries abstained.

The position of the European countries on the issue is particularly surprising. Europe must have forgotten how the problem of refugees was handled after WWII. There were approximately 40 mln displaced people in Europe in May 1945, plus the Germans who fled from the Red Army. Besides, 11.3 mln forced laborers still remained in Germany. At that time Europe's decision was clear: refugees were not to return to the regions of residence but to receive material compensations for their sufferings. Otherwise, some 3 mln Germans would have returned to Czechoslovakia, 3.5-3.7 mln Germans and 3 mln Ukrainians - to Poland, over 3 mln Poles - to Ukraine and Lithuania. The rationale behind the decision was simple - it was clear that the return of refugees in such numbers would make another round of bloodshed imminent.

Advocating the return of refugees today, the European countries neglect their own historical experience.

The Russian delegation opposed the Georgian plan and said that its implementation would entail an escalation of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. A statement by the Russian Foreign Ministry described the resolution as counterproductive. Ten countries - Armenia, Belarus, Venezuela, India, Iran, China, Burma, Serbia, Syria, and Sudan - sided with Russia on the issue.

The vote shows quite definitely that the international community did not support Georgia's maneuvers. In contrast to Security Council resolutions, those of the General Assembly are non-binding recommendations (though the international law does recognize the right of refugees to return to their

residences). It is hard to imagine that Abkhazians will allow refugees to return knowing that as a result once again they are going to become a minority in their own Republic.

Prof. V. Naumkin has an original vision of the problem. Contrary to the widely held view, the status of the unrecognized territory is not the key issue. A more important role is played by the demographic aspect of the problem. Prior to the war, Abkhazians made just 17% of the Republic's population, but nearly all Georgians fled Abkhazia during the hostilities.

By now, some 60,000 Georgians have returned to the Gali region. Suppose that somehow the independent status of Abkhazia wins the international recognition. The return of refugees and some form of the international control over the process would necessarily be a part of the package. Are Abkhazians ready to embrace independence provided that the Republic's population is going to be predominantly Georgian, with all the predictable consequences of the disposition? It is hardly possible to create a political system under which an ethnic group numbering less than 1/5 of the total population gets an exclusive political right to run the country. The coexistence of the two ethnic groups both dispersed over the territory appears unlikely after all that has happened. The chances to put the plan into practice can rise substantially in case Georgia opts for the status of a neutral country, thus creating conditions for a reunion with Russia, and rules out resorting to force in the relations with Abkhazia.

Several days ago, Washington returned to the issue of an international police mission in the zone of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. In this context, the very premises are unacceptable. What would be the legal foundations for dispatching the police force, their functions and responsibilities? As of today, the 1992 Moscow ceasefire agreement recognized by the UN and charted with its help remains the main document regulating the peacekeeping process.

Despite all the miscalculations and failures of the Russian policy in Georgia, the Russian peacekeepers must be credited with playing a positive and stabilizing role in the conflict zone. Nevertheless, Moscow should not reject the international community's involvement in the conflict resolution. Russia's optimal strategy would be to combine the military and political dominance in the region with encouraging the Abkhazian elite's international contacts. Adding the UN presence to its peacekeeping mission would allow Russia to strengthen its position of the guarantor of peace in the Caucasus.
