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# **New Russian Bases In Abkhazia, South Ossetia Strengthen Moscow's Hand In South Caucasus, Black Sea Region**

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Russia will set up land, sea and air bases in the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, thus strengthening Moscow's military position not only in the South Caucasus but across the Black Sea region and preemptively countering any moves by NATO to increase cooperation with or extend membership to Georgia.

Yesterday, Moscow signed agreements with the two republics it has recognized as independent countries that makes Moscow responsible for providing security to these republics and for representing them and their citizens abroad where their governments do not have representations.

In addition, the sides commit themselves to respecting the territorial integrity and borders of the Russian Federation, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, specify that citizens of one may be citizens of the other, and prohibit membership in any bloc or organization directed against one of the signatory states.

But the most immediately important aspect of the accords concerns the establishment of Russian bases in the two republics. In South Ossetia, Russia will set up an air base and an army base near Dzhavny, which is not far from Tskhinvali. And in Abkhazia, it will have a navy base at Ochamchir and an air base at Gudauta.

According to Vladimir Yevseyev, a Moscow military expert, there will be approximately 3800 Russian military personnel in each of these republics, and they will not only support the Russian fleet in the Black Sea but also serve as "a restraining factor" if Georgia, "as seems likely, sooner or later will become a member of NATO.

And consequently, "Nezavisimaya gazeta" concludes, this will "change in a cardinal fashion the balance of forces in the Transcaucasus" and even further afield, allowing Moscow to project power and thus to have a continuing influence not only on Georgia but on Azerbaijan and Armenia as well.

The signing of the treaties did not go without a hitch: Eduard Kokoity, the leader of South Ossetia, once again could not restrain himself and said, as he has before, that his republic "intends to become part of Russia" even though Moscow has made it clear that won't happen -- at least formally -- anytime soon.

In addition to Russia's military presence in the two breakaway republics, Moscow may be seeking to use them in other ways to weaken the countries of the south Caucasus and thus to strengthen Moscow's position there.

One possibility of such actions that has been discussed in some detail by Aleksey Chichkin on the RPFMonitor.ru portal would have Abkhazia create separate autonomous territories within its borders for the Svans and Mingrelians, two sub-ethnoses of the Georgian nation.

Not only would the creation of such entities have an impact on IDPs who have fled that region, but it could help to play up tensions between the two

groups in Georgia itself now or at least represent a continuing threat to Tbilisi that Moscow could employ at some point in the future.

And while not directly connected to what Moscow has done in the breakaway republics, the Russian authorities may be behind something else: increasing activism by ethnic Armenians in Javakhetia, a region in southern Georgia, in the wake of the Russian government's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Aram Argutyan, the head of the Bagin Information Center in Javakhetia, gave an extensive interview this week in which he said that Yerevan has little interest in helping his people - the Armenian government recognizes that any moves might be counterproductive - but that his people can now look to Moscow after its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Such attention from the ethnic Armenians of southern Georgia could give Moscow yet another lever on Georgia.

At the very least, the Russian government's ability to stimulate tensions and unrest there creates another headache for Tbilisi even if the Russian intelligence services do not do anything immediately.

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