



BULLETIN

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Georgia's Security After the Withdrawal of the International Observation Missions

Tomasz Sikorski

Russia's refusal to allow the prolongation of the mandates for the OSCE and UN missions in Georgia limited the participation of the international community in the resolution of the conflict between Georgia and the Russian-supported separatist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia also conducted comprehensive military maneuvers ("Kavkaz 2009") in the region. However, the probability of the outbreak of an armed conflict seems slight and the actions of the Russians are aimed at forcing Georgia to recognize de facto the break-away republics, while Georgia, convinced of the new US administration's support, will not be inclined to make concessions.

The Importance of International Peacekeeping Missions. Before last year's war, two observation missions were present in Georgia, that of the OSCE in South Ossetia and that of the UN in Abkhazia (UNOMIG). Their greatest weakness was technical and logistical dependence on Russia which was, at the same time, a party in the conflict. For this reason, the missions were not in a position to prevent the escalation of border incidents after 2006, the concentration of Russian troops in the Caucasus in 2008, the attack of Georgian troops on Tskhinvali in the night of 7 to 8 August 2008 and, lastly, the Russian offensive and the occupation of additional parts of Georgia. In turn the mission of the European Union, deployed in Georgia on 1 October 2008 (EUMM), has not gained access to areas controlled by the separatist republics till this day.

Despite their drawbacks, the missions played an important role, especially after the August 2008 war, when it became obvious that the dispute is essentially a Georgian-Russian one, and not one between the Georgian central government and the authorities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. During multilateral discussions about the security and stabilization of Georgia conducted from October 2008 in Geneva under the auspices of the OSCE, UN and EU, the international community maintained its support for Georgian territorial integrity, in contrast to the position of Russia which, on 26 August 2008, recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In Geneva, Russian diplomacy attempted to incline Georgia to sign an understanding on the renunciation from the use of force with the authorities of the two separatist republics, something that would have signified Georgia's de facto recognition of the subjectivity of Abkhazia and South Ossetia under international law. By raising the argument of the independence of both provinces, Russia also sought to divide the UN and OSCE missions into Georgian, Abkhazian and South Ossetian parts. Attempts to reach an understanding brought no result, and this ultimately led to the expiry of the mandate of the UNOMIG mission on 15 June 2009 and of the OSCE mission on 30 June 2009. Most probably Russia's staunch support of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was merely a pretext to break off the negotiations about the extension of both mandates. The aim of these actions was the removal of the UN and OSCE missions, something that in effect, strengthened Russia's position with regard to Georgia, which found itself deprived of the benefits entailed by the presence of international organizations on its territory.

Presently, there are 246 EUMM observers in Georgia, and their mission's mandate expires on 30 September 2009. It can be extended and Russia has no legal means to prevent EU countries from reaching an understanding on this matter.

Russian Military Maneuvers and the Possibility of Aggression. On 29 June – 6 July 2009, Russia conducted military exercises (“Kavkaz 2009”) with the participation of 8,500 soldiers, 200 tanks, 250 pieces of artillery, 30 airplanes as well as ships from the Caspian and Black Sea fleets. This raised fears about stability in the region of the South Caucasus and even about possible Russian aggression against Georgia. These fears were then reinforced by the increasingly belligerent pronouncements of Russian politicians and the rising number of incidents near the front line of the 2008 war (the explosion at the Zugdidi rail junction on 11 June, the attack on EUMM observers near Georgia's border with Abkhazia on 21 June, and repeated exchanges of fire in South Ossetia).

The recent events are most probably not preparatory stages for war. The potential benefits for Russia from an invasion on Georgia (settling the conflict between Georgia and the separatist republics in keeping with Russia's wishes, a Russian protectorate in Georgia) would be outweighed by the costs (a setback for the “new opening” policy towards the USA, negative reactions on the international stage, problems with maintaining control over Georgian territory). There are also serious differences between the present situation and that of August 2008. In particular, provoking Georgia seems much less probable. It is also debatable whether Russia is truly interested in settling the conflict in the South Caucasus by force. Thus far, its actions indicate that it is rather in its interest to maintain a state of instability there, something that gives it a pretext to intervene in its neighbor's internal affairs.

In this situation, it seems that, despite Moscow's aggressive rhetoric, Russia is not aiming for war but, rather, is implementing a wider geopolitical strategy. To the international community it is showing its determination to defend the independence of the separatist republics (this was the most probable purpose for president Medvedev's visit in South Ossetia on 13 July 2009). It can't be ruled out that the aim of this step was to show other countries that Georgia's loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is final and that discussion in this matter is closed. At the same time, Russia's actions in relation to Georgia are aimed at destabilizing that country internally and forcing it to make small concessions undermining the effectiveness of the Georgian government in the eyes of Georgian public opinion.

The Position of Georgia. Russia's pressuring policy will most probably prove ineffective. Georgia has not recognized the separatist republics and it seems unlikely it will do so in the near future. Quite the contrary, the authorities in Tbilisi are not giving up on the postulate of Georgia's territorial integrity and the necessity of reintegrating its two rebel provinces. Georgia is ready to sign an agreement on non-aggression, but only with Russia. It should be stressed that the majority of the Georgian opposition, despite the frequent protests since April 2009, supports president Saakashvili on the issue of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, so even a change of government would not alter Georgia's policy.

Georgia's position was additionally reinforced by the actions of American diplomacy. On 22 June, the first meeting of the United States-Georgia Commission on Strategic Partnership, at the deputy-ministerial level, took place in Washington. The commission's actions are based on the provisions of the Charter on Strategic Partnership signed by the USA and Georgia in early January 2009 and are indicative of Obama's continuation of G.W. Bush's policy with regard to the countries of the post-Soviet area. This view is reinforced by president Obama's visit to Moscow on 6–8 July 2009, during which he mentioned Georgia's territorial integrity on several occasions. Vice-President Joe Biden's visit in Georgia between 20 and 24 July 2009 will also be significant in this context.

Forecast. While a Russian invasion of Georgia in 2009 seems unlikely, there is a great probability of recurring ceasefire violations as part of the above-mentioned pressure policy. The period leading to the end of August will be particularly dangerous in this context as the anniversary of the events of 8 and 26 August 2008 will bring provocations on the front line of the 2008 war and aggressive rhetoric. Moreover, the sabotaging of the 7th round of the Geneva talks (on 17 September) by planned armed incidents or attacks on EUMM personnel, similar to the one of 21 June, seem probable. An additional aim of these actions could be to discourage EU member countries from extending the observation mission's mandate.

No diplomatic settlement of the conflict should be expected in the short and medium term perspective. It is doubtful that Georgia will recognize *de facto*—not to mention *de iure* recognition—the subjectivity of Abkhazia and South Ossetia which, with Russian support, consider themselves full-fledged members of the international community. The opposing stances of Georgia and the separatist republics rule out any lasting understanding. In both Russia and Georgia, hostility towards the other country prevails and, for this reason, a change of government in either of the two countries will not bring closer an understanding. For this reason, it seems that the conflict will return to the state of ceasefire interspaced with periods of tension and provocations.