

Tensions between Georgia and Russia escalate

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Consultations have begun in Moscow between representatives of the Joint Control Commission (JSS) for a settlement of the Georgia-South Ossetia conflict.

The talks came after the Georgian administration of Mikhail Saakashvili intensified pressure on the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Under the pretext of combating bandits it claims are supported by Russia, Saakashvili has moved the exiled Abkhazian parliament into the Kodori Gorge. This area, which straddles the border between the breakaway republic of Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia, is the only part of Abkhazia controlled by Tbilisi.

In the Abkhaz capital Sukhumi, the move was seen as a virtual declaration of war. The government has announced its intention to fight should Georgian forces encroach on Abkhazian territory.

Relations between Georgia and Russia have been tense since the US-backed deposing of Eduard Shevardnadze and the coming to power of Saakashvili in the so-called Rose Revolution of 2003.

In this latest conflict, the Putin administration in Moscow warned Georgia that its actions are in contravention of the peace treaty drawn up by the two parties in 1994. The Tbilisi government protests that the agreement is now illegitimate because it was signed by Shevardnadze and was, it claims, designed to enslave the Georgians.

Russia's foreign ministry spokesman Mikhail Kamynin said that the Georgian military deployments in the Kodori Gorge represent a "striving to build a bridgehead for the forceful solution to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict."

On August 15, Saakashvili said he would order his government to build a small town and an airfield in Georgia's Kodori Gorge. This would serve as a lesson for the separatists and those protecting them, he said, and would show Abkhazia that "we can do in a month what they have been unable to do for 14 years."

In a statement, Russia's deputy foreign minister Grigory Karasin publicly backed Abkhazia. In both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the majority of citizens have been issued Russian passports. The currency in Abkhazia is the Russian ruble rather than the Georgian lari. Any attempt by Tbilisi to gain control of the territories by military means could see Russia denounce an attack upon its citizens, and Moscow has let it be known that any incursion by Georgian troops beyond the Kodori Gorge will be met by overwhelming military force. Abkhazian parliamentary speaker Nugzar Ashuba warned that "a scent of gunpowder is already in the air."

Britain's *Economist* magazine said that a confrontation between the Georgian forces and Russian, Abkhazian and/or South Ossetian could easily escalate into a bloody protracted war of attrition. Its leader advised, "It would be wise to give those Georgian conflicts some attention now, before the worst happens...both may at any moment devolve from uneasy truce to renewed fighting."

The leaders of several ethnic organisations in the North Caucasus have vowed to despatch thousands of volunteers to defend Abkhazia if Tbilisi launches an offensive. Uali Yevgamukov of the Abazin ethnic movement said, "The Abkhaz people are our brothers and it is our duty to stand by them in case of war." Most of the delegation that visited Abkhazian President Sergei Bagapsh represent ethnic Adgys living in Adygeya, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karacheyevo-Cherkessia. Hundreds of Adgys fought alongside Abkhazian forces against Tbilisi in the 1992-1993 separatist war against Georgia.

Tensions between Tbilisi and the other breakaway region South Ossetia have also escalated. A string of assassinations in South Ossetia was blamed by the government in Tskhinvali on Georgian secret services. American diplomat Matthew Bryza described the

tensions between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali as “worryingly high.”

This was exacerbated by Saakashvili sacking Georgy Khaindrava, the sole member of the Georgian government trusted by the South Ossetian leadership, just one day before the Kodori Gorge incursion. Khaindrava was the minister for conflict resolution before being stripped of his portfolio. Regional commentators have referred to his departure as a victory for what they call the “party of war” in Tbilisi. The day after his sacking, the Georgian parliament issued a resolution calling for the removal of all Russian peacekeepers from South Ossetian soil.

Saakashvili’s avowedly right-wing government could not rattle sabres at Moscow were it not for the support it receives from Washington. Motivated by its desire to dominate the entire region, the Bush regime is goading Georgia into more-aggressive military action and supplying it with military training and arms.

The United States utilises Georgia as a proxy force in its struggle to disconnect Russian control from what Moscow calls its “near abroad”—i.e., the south Caucasus and wider central Asia. Georgia is the third-biggest recipient of US aid after Israel and Egypt. Encouraged by Washington, the Georgian state has increased military spending by 143 percent this year. It has threatened South Ossetia with a series of large-scale military exercises and manoeuvres near the border in recent months.

For its part, by using its troops to shelter the two tiny republics, Moscow seeks to offset Washington’s ambitions while strengthening its influence upon the former Soviet republics.

In January, Georgia accused Russia of “gas sabotage” after several explosions on the Mozdok-Tbilisi gas pipeline in North Ossetia disrupted the country’s supplies for several weeks. More recently, the Putin administration banned Georgian wine, the country’s second-largest export commodity, and mineral water from export to Russia, its largest market.

Energy supplies are the key consideration in rising tensions in the region. A central issue in the rising tensions is the recently opened Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline that circumnavigates Russian territory, running from the Azerbaijani Caspian coast, through Georgia and to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. A gas pipeline along a similar route is to be

opened in the near future.

The BTC pipeline runs within striking distance of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In addition to the dangers posed to the pipeline by a regional war in the south Caucasus, media commentators are also concerned by the implications of a larger war in the Middle East and Persian Gulf.



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