

Russia and Georgia on the brink of armed conflict over Abkhazia

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Tensions between Russia and Georgia have intensified to the brink of open armed conflict.

Both sides accuse each other of escalating tensions and armed preparations, threatening to plunge the region into a new round of bloody conflicts. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, conflicts in the Caucasus have taken the lives of tens of thousands of people.

The center of the confrontation at present is Abkhazia, a small territory in the northwestern part of Georgia bordering Russia and located along the shore of the Black Sea. The majority of the population in Abkhazia carry Russian passports.

The Abkhazian side claims that 1,500 Georgian troops have been sent into the Kodori Valley on the border of the republic and 2,000 into the Zugdidi region. According to Russia, practically every day there are deliveries of military supplies to Georgia, particularly from Turkey.

Georgia accuses Russia of trying to carry out a “creeping annexation” of Abkhazia, and of concentrating its armed forces there. At the beginning of May, Russia increased by one-and-a-half times its contingent of what it calls peace keepers in Abkhazia—from 2,000 to 3,000 troops, justifying this action by the military preparations being made by Georgia, as well as the desire of the Georgian regime to enter NATO.

The situation has heated up dramatically since a Georgian unmanned reconnaissance plane was shot down on April 20. Georgia insists that it was destroyed by a Russian MiG-29 fighter plane, but Moscow claims it was shot down by the armed forces of Abkhazia.

A few days later, a similar Georgian spy plane was shot down, and on May 4, two more.

On April 27, Valery Kenyaikin, a representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry, warned that if matters reached the level of armed conflict, Russia would be prepared to use “military methods” to defend its citizens.

In the days since, the situation has remained tense, although Russia somewhat muted its propaganda campaign to accommodate the Kremlin inauguration of the new Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev.

One of the latest episodes in the confrontation was the statement made on May 5 by the Georgian Foreign Ministry that the country was ending its participation in the 1995 pact between nations of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) regarding military collaboration. This document, which stipulated the creation of a joint system of air defense, was signed by the heads of the ten states of the CIS: Armenia, Belorussia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kirgizia, Russia, Tadzhikistan, Turkmenia, Uzbekistan and Ukraine. Although Georgia’s participation in this agreement was largely nominal, its gesture in repudiating the pact testifies to the depth of the intensifying conflict.

The strained relations between Russia and Georgia date from the US-backed coup d’état in Tbilisi carried out in the fall of 2003, known as the “Rose Revolution.” In the course of these events, then-Georgian president, Eduard Shevardnadze—the minister of foreign affairs of the USSR during Gorbachev’s “perestroika”—was forced to resign, and power passed to a troika of younger politicians whom he had promoted and who

had been his closest protégés.

Mikhail Saakashvili took the post of president, Zurab Zhvania became prime minister, and Nino Burdzhanadze became the head of parliament. In February 2005, under as yet unexplained and rather strange circumstances, Zhvania, who was considered an experienced and extremely influential politician, was found dead. After his death, full power was concentrated in the hands of Saakashvili, who has shown himself to be the servile partner and, in essence, a puppet of the United States.

Combining “free market” economic liberalism and patronage of big business with assaults on the living standards of the common citizens of Georgia, Saakashvili has been forced to rely increasingly on the political and military support of the West, primarily the US. He has also sought salvation in ever more aggressive nationalist rhetoric. One of the touchstones of the latter is the slogan of reestablishing Tbilisi’s control over the two separatist regions that have broken away—South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

One other historical region of Georgia, Adzharia, which *de facto* became independent in the 1990s under the leadership of a local politician, Aslan Abashidze, was, in the spring of 2004, almost bloodlessly returned to Tbilisi’s control. Abashidze was exiled and, according to rumors, is hiding to this day in Russia.

From the moment Saakashvili came to power, the United States gave his government political and military support, helping, in particular, to arm, equip and strengthen the Georgian army, which in the previous decade had largely been a collection of separate units subordinated to various commanders.

For the US, this support has major significance. According to the doctrine worked out in the post-Soviet period by leading centers of the Washington establishment, the region of Central Asia, the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus is decisive to global geo-political domination in the immediate historical period. Rich in oil, gas and mineral resources, this region is a bridge between Southeast Asia, with the growing economies of China and India, and Europe—the most important competitor of the American ruling elite.

Control over access to the region’s natural resources and their supply to world markets can provide a decisive advantage in the struggle for geo-political domination in a period when the American economy is increasingly losing its leading world position, and the world capitalist economy as a whole is descending into an abyss of economic crisis unseen since the time of the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Russia, in turn, is emerging as one of the active participants in the sharpening geo-political struggle. Relying on its natural resources and reaping enormous profits from soaring prices of raw materials, and possessing the biggest military machine in Eurasia, including a powerful arsenal of nuclear weapons, Russia during Vladimir Putin’s presidency was able to recoup some of the positions on the world arena it had lost in 1990s.

For the time being, Moscow has managed to retain its control of the

strategic oil and gas pipeline routes into Europe from Central Asia and the Caspian Sea area, but this situation could be quickly undermined if nations in the region decided to support projects for which the United States and Western Europe are lobbying.

The strengthening the military and political influence of the US in the Caucasus, Ukraine and other countries of Eastern Europe is a crucial element in the efforts of the American ruling elite to secure its geo-political interests against its European competitors. US plans to develop an American missile defense system based in Poland and the Czech Republic, and similar proposals being made by Turkey, are animated by Washington's overarching drive for hegemony in the region.

The aggressive policies of American imperialism are the main source of the growing confrontation in the Caucasus. This, however, by no means alters the fact that Russia's bellicose response is dictated exclusively by the selfish interests of the ruling oligarchic and bureaucratic clans in the Kremlin, whose power is based on the ruthless exploitation of the Russian working class and the plundering of the country's natural resources.

A new turn in the confrontation in the Caucasus began in March 2006, when Russia introduced economic sanctions against Georgia (and also Moldavia). A complete ban was placed on import into Russia of Georgian mineral water and wine, for which Russia has traditionally been the main market. These sanctions were a painful blow to Georgian agricultural producers, who have not been able to redirect their products to the markets of other countries. Losses to the Georgian economy are valued at tens, if not hundreds, of millions of dollars.

In the fall of the same year, the Russian embassy stopped issuing visas to citizens of Georgia—after Russian military personnel were seized under suspicion of espionage. The Kremlin also incited a chauvinist campaign to persecute Georgian entrepreneurs living in Russia.

Later, Russia lifted some of the sanctions and limitations, but, on the whole, the atmosphere of suspicion, fear and mutual incrimination only thickened.

The immediate catalyst for the latest increase in tension is the plan to accept Georgia into NATO, compounded by Kosovo's declaration of independence in February of this year. The West's recognition of Kosovo's independence created a precedent for legitimizing separatist regimes in regions such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia and Pridnestrovie in Moldavia. Russia warned that it might respond to the recognition of Kosovo's independence by recognizing the independence of the three above-cited pro-Russian regions.

Up to now, however, the Kremlin has held back from taking such a step, despite the fact that Russia's State Duma in March conducted public debates and spoke in favor of recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This caution is fed by fears that a line might be crossed in Russian-US relations leading to a direct geo-political and even military confrontation with Washington.

Meanwhile, the US intervention in the Caucasus and in Eastern Europe continues. Last month, at a NATO summit in Brussels, the alliance reviewed the question of offering Ukraine and Georgia membership action plans for entry into NATO. Although the decision was negative, the majority of commentators indicate that this was only a temporary postponement.

The entry of Ukraine and Georgia into NATO, if it occurs, will sharply increase the danger of armed conflict between Russia and the NATO bloc, with unpredictable consequences. The question of the status of Abkhazia is one of the disagreements that contain the seeds of a bloody conflict in the region.

That is why the Kremlin has preferred not to recognize the juridical independence of Abkhazia, while deciding instead to strengthen economic ties with the republic. On March 6, Russia declared the lifting of economic sanctions against Abkhazia, and on April 16, President Putin instructed the Russian government to establish special relations with

Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which essentially set in motion a mechanism for integrating these regions into the social and economic sphere of Russia.

The newspaper *Kommersant* wrote on April 17 that Putin "has in fact ... ordered the establishment of relations with the unrecognized republics according to the model of the relations between the federal center and the regions of Russia."

The leading countries of the West have condemned Russia's actions. At a session of the UN Security Council on April 23, the US, Great Britain, France and Germany spoke in support of the Georgian government.

For now, none of the NATO countries has made a proposal concerning the withdrawal of Russian peace keepers from the zone of conflict or their replacement by some other force. But the atmosphere of preparing world public opinion for the possibility of armed conflict with Russia continues to intensify.

Senators Joseph Biden (Democrat of Delaware) and Richard Lugar (Republican of Indiana), who are respectively the chairman and ranking minority member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, recently declared that attempts to cajole Moscow had failed. They say the time has come to show unity and resolve within the transatlantic community, and that NATO should decide to offer Georgia and Ukraine membership application plans at its next summit in December of this year. "If we do not begin to act soon, peaceful resolution of the crisis will become impossible," Lugar and Biden declared.

In fact, this would signify an ultimatum that the Kremlin acknowledge that the loss of its most important geo-political positions in the "near abroad" is an accomplished fact.

No less aggressive is the ideological campaign being waged by the Russian media. One of the leading Kremlin political observers, Mikhail Leontiev, said last February in a radio interview: "I see colossal challenges and threats. I feel that Russia must prepare for war, and not simply pick its nose."

He added: "They [the Americans] want to destroy us ... If we prepare for war well, then perhaps it will not happen ... But if we prepare badly, it definitely will."



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