

# BALANCING THE BALANCER: RUSSIA, THE WEST, AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN GEORGIA

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The unveiling by Georgia of its South Ossetia peace initiative at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in January 2005 marked a new phase in conflict resolution in the former Soviet republic. Not only did the Georgian government at last demonstrate a clear commitment to negotiating a political settlement of its longstanding conflict with the breakaway region of South Ossetia, it also requested that the United States and the European Union directly assist in implementing the peace proposal. Tbilisi thus sought that Western states serve as a direct counterweight to Russia, which has dominated the peace process in South Ossetia and that relating to the even more intractable conflict with the separatist region of Abkhazia in the north-western corner of Georgia.

Tbilisi's request caps a seven-year effort to engage the United States and the European Union with a view to acquiring security guarantees against Russia and reuniting Georgia with its lost territories. There are several arguments both for and against greater Western involvement in Georgia's conflicts. The die, however, has been cast: the question is not whether the West will increase its involvement, but how. While there is no guarantee that any form of increased Western engagement will succeed in reunifying Georgia, taking Georgia's South Ossetian peace initiative seriously is an excellent first step towards that goal.

## **Stalemate under Russia**

Since ceasefires were established for the South Ossetian conflict in 1992 and the Abkhazian conflict in 1994, Russia has dominated the peacekeeping structures responsible for preventing a renewal of fighting in these regions, while doing little to produce permanent political settlements. More than two hundred thousand people, including most of the local Georgian population, remain displaced from Abkhazia as a result of the hostilities there.

Russia threatened armed intervention to stop the Georgian offensive in South Ossetia in 1992, less than six months after the Soviet Union collapsed. Russia supervised the signing of a June ceasefire agreement between South Ossetia and Georgia which, together with a supplemental agreement in July, established a joint control commission (JCC) to promote stability and monitor the peace. A 1,500-man joint peacekeeping force (JPF) served as the JCC's main instrument.

The JCC included representatives from Russia, Georgia, South Ossetia, and North Ossetia (which borders South Ossetia but lies inside Russia), and the same quartet (North Ossetia informally) provided the troops that made up the JPF. Together, the JCC and JPF were responsible for maintaining order in the so-called conflict zone, a large band of territory

surrounding South Ossetia's southern border that served as a buffer around the former area of hostilities. Complementing the JCC–JPF peacekeeping format was a small mission from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. The OSCE mission, established in December 1992, aimed to facilitate the peace and encourage negotiations towards a political settlement.

War broke out in Abkhazia in mid-August 1992, less than two months after Georgia signed the South Ossetia ceasefire. After a handful of Russian-brokered truces failed to hold, the fall of the capital Sukhumi to Abkhazian forces in September 1993 and the accompanying exodus of Georgians from the region encouraged Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze to join the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), membership of which Georgia had previously refused, in return for Russian mediation in the conflict. By that time, Shevardnadze had also secured a commitment from the United Nations to play a mediating role. UN military observers arrived in Georgia in August 1993, a month before the end of the war, and Russian-led negotiations took place at the end of the year under UN auspices. In February 1994, Shevardnadze agreed to legalise the deployment of Russian border guards in Georgia and signed an agreement (never ratified by parliament) that permitted Moscow to retain four Soviet-era military bases in Georgia for twenty-five years. A final ceasefire agreement was signed in Moscow in May 1994 that provided for a CIS (essentially Russian) peacekeeping contingent as well as a UN observer mission to monitor the truce.

This mixed approach to conflict resolution, characterised by Russian-dominated peacekeeping efforts legitimised by various levels of multilateral engagement, including the CIS, the United Nations, the OSCE, and, in the case of the South Ossetian conflict, even a Russian federal region (North Ossetia), made sense in early years. Russia was the only actor at the time that could credibly interpose itself between the warring parties. As a member of the OSCE and the United Nations, and arguably the sole member willing to take on the burden of local peacekeeping, Russia could depict itself as the leading representative of a global peacekeeping and mediation effort, rather than as a post-imperial state intent on retaining hegemony over its “near abroad”.

The balance of negotiating power that emerged, however, did not lead to productive talks but stalemate. Whatever Russia's intention, its function as a “hegemonic balancer” interposed between conflicting parties resulted in the establishment of a level playing field for negotiations, allowing Abkhazia and South Ossetia to consider themselves equals to Georgia, not subordinates. Within the context of these “frozen conflicts”, opposing sides did maintain a cessation of hostilities and occasionally reached agreement in the spheres of trade, transport, and the return of refugees. A renewal of conflict in 1998 between Georgian guerrillas and Abkhazian forces, leading to the ejection of thousands of returned Georgians to Abkhazia's southernmost region of Gali, was an exception to this rule.

At the same time, the sides made no progress towards a political settlement. As early as 1997, Russia secured agreement from another post-Soviet separatist region, Transdniestria, to commit itself at least to the principle of reunification with its parent state, Moldova. In 1995, a year after hostilities ceased in Abkhazia, Russia developed a similar proposal for the Abkhazian authorities to sign, but the latter rejected it. Russia imposed a blockade on Abkhazia and periodically reinforced it, but these sanctions did not lead to a greater willingness on the part of Abkhazians to negotiate. While lesser issues divided Tbilisi from South Ossetia, and repeated meetings of Shevardnadze with former regional leader Ludvig Chibirov raised hopes that a political solution could be found, South Ossetians also never committed themselves to reunification. Russian officials repeatedly claimed to lack the capacity to pressure breakaway regions to engage in political negotiations. As the years passed, however, Russian failure to achieve any breakthroughs in conflict resolution appeared to reflect a lack of will more than of ability.

## The United States Steps In

Frustrated that its “new” alliance with Russia did not result in Georgia’s reintegration and hoping for an alternative to assist in this, as well as in Georgia’s overall development, Shevardnadze moved at the end of the 1990s to distance Georgia strategically from Russia. Along with Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, Georgia refused to renew membership in the CIS Collective Security Treaty. It also replaced Russian border guards with its own troops and retracted its invitation to host Russian military bases for the long term. In the November 1999 OSCE summit in Istanbul, Georgia even secured a Russian commitment to withdraw in 2001 from two of its bases, near Tbilisi and in Abkhazia (although, in practice, the latter concession was symbolic given the presence of Russian peacekeepers in the region). Both sides promised to complete negotiations in 2000 regarding the status of the two other Russian bases in Georgia, located near the Turkish border; these negotiations, however, were for years unsuccessful.

At the same time, Georgia began more actively to pursue security and energy relationships with the United States and Europe. Although Georgian leaders initially called for their country’s integration into NATO when the Soviet Union fell apart, they only pursued this goal seriously eight years later, once Georgia withdrew from the CIS Collective Security Treaty. Georgia also supported US policy on the construction of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan energy corridor by which oil from the Caspian Sea would transit directly through the southern Caucasus, bypassing Russia and Iran. In particular, Georgia’s dependence on Russian energy supplies promises to be reduced by a future pipeline carrying Caspian gas from Baku via Tbilisi to the north-eastern Turkish city of Erzurum.

Focusing on Shevardnadze’s role in ending the Cold War—as well as on the stability, civil society, and new generation of pro-Western politicians he promoted—American and European supporters of Georgia remained hopeful that the country would yet flourish. During Shevardnadze’s eleven-year rule (1992–2003), Georgia received more than \$1.3 billion in American aid, making it one of the largest per capita recipients of US assistance. A strong programme of US military aid to Georgia—a potential ally in a strategic, energy-rich region—began to develop in 1998, including the training of border and coast guards and a grant of ten used combat helicopters. Further establishing its independent role in the international community, Georgia in 1999 became the first southern Caucasus state to join the Council of Europe and, the next year, the World Trade Organisation (making it the WTO’s fourth ex-Soviet member after Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, and Estonia).

The 11 September terrorist attacks against the United States ushered in an even more active phase in US–Georgian relations. For nearly two years before 11 September, Russia had accused Georgia of harbouring Chechen terrorists in its north-eastern Pankisi Gorge, home of a Muslim people closely related to Chechens that had settled there in the nineteenth century. While Georgia initially denied Russian accusations, mounting evidence that hundreds of militants were sheltering in the gorge allowed Russia to pressure Tbilisi either to tighten its side of the border and evict the unwanted guests, or allow Russian forces to enter Georgia and pursue the militants themselves. After 11 September, amid US preparations to attack Afghanistan, Russia was even freer to threaten unilateral action against the militants if Georgia did not take care of the problem itself.

Supporting the United States in the war on terror, Georgia requested US assistance to defend itself against this external threat. Concerned about jihadist elements in the Pankisi Gorge, the United States had adequate justification to respond positively to Georgia’s request. The outcome was a two-year, \$64 million military assistance package, the Georgian Train and Equip Programme (GTEP), announced in February 2002. This upgraded security partnership with the United States offered Georgia a means of taking care of its Pankisi problem, and without violence: most militants left Georgia just as the programme was getting under way.

Besides dealing with the Pankisi problem, the new partnership provided Georgia with what it wanted: a buffer against Russian pressure. In tandem with GTEP, the United States delivered explicit signals to Russia that it did not consider threats of force, and especially sporadic missile attacks on northern Georgian territory, to be acceptable instruments of pressure. Drawing a red line against transgressions of Georgian sovereignty, the United States made it clear that Georgia was no longer under Moscow's thumb.

GTEP training focused on counter-terrorism and general military preparation, and was not intended to serve as a bridgehead for conflict resolution. In fact, US officials insisted that as a requirement of GTEP, Georgia not use its forces trained under the programme in any military operation against Abkhazia. Ironically (as will be seen below), these stipulations failed to specify operations against South Ossetia, an oversight that was perhaps due to South Ossetia's being a less contentious issue at the time. The Georgians themselves believed they had to resolve Abkhazia first, after which the South Ossetia conflict would "take care of itself".

The way the situation in the Pankisi Gorge was resolved gave no grounds for fearing that GTEP-trained forces were being prepared for use in Abkhazia or South Ossetia. GTEP did not transform Georgia's beleaguered armed forces into a lethal fighting machine overnight. What it did was signal to militants that Georgia was finally serious about denying them shelter.

Nor was there any indication that the United States was going to make conflict resolution in Georgia a central plank in its overall Russia and Eurasia policy. In the 1990s, Washington evinced little interest in pursuing a more active conflict-resolution policy, preferring to leave responsibility to the United Nations and the OSCE missions, in which the United States played a peripheral role. After 11 September, US policymakers appreciated the need to prevent the proliferation of uncontrolled territories around the globe, and this imperative did translate into a need to support more energetically the resolution of Georgia's territorial conflicts.

At the same time, however, the partnership with Russia had also become even more important after 11 September. The Clinton administration viewed Russia as a partner, not an adversary, and was unwilling to risk spoiling that partnership by pushing for a more active conflict-resolution process in Georgia or other post-Soviet states. Strategic considerations, centring on the war on terror and nuclear non-proliferation, made the partnership with Russia even more vital to the administration of George W. Bush. In this context, promoting an alternative approach to conflict resolution which challenged Russia's hegemonic role was not an idea seriously considered.

Moreover, thanks to the progress of international mediation in the Transdniestrian conflict (the OSCE mission in Moldova being headed by a US diplomat), there was some promise that working steadily with Russia on conflict resolution would eventually bear fruit. In 2002–3, Moldova and Transdniestria moved through several drafts of a peace agreement that unambiguously mandated their reunification, albeit on federal terms and with Russia (and neighbouring Ukraine) as co-guarantors of the reunification agreement. In November 2003, Russia overplayed its hand and sought Moldova's approval for an even looser confederation. Lacking Western support and garnering a negative popular reaction in Moldova, this plan fell flat. Still, the previous two-year experience offered hope that the United States and Russia, together with European OSCE mediators, could work jointly to produce a conflict settlement satisfactory to all. If such a multilateral effort proved successful for Transdniestria, then it also seemed the best way to deal with the Abkhazia and South Ossetia crises.

Lastly, Georgia was not doing as much as it could internally to attract greater support for the conflict-resolution cause. After years of Western support for reform, Georgia did not fulfil the expectations of its financiers. While not a dictatorship, the Shevardnadze regime was deeply flawed, with crippling corruption and a dysfunctional governing system that failed to deliver even basic supplies of gas and electricity to its citizens. Although the worst of its corruption and dysfunction (such as the collaboration of interior and security officials with Pankisi-based militants in a lucrative drug-and-kidnapping trade) waned with the stepped-up effort against the militants, these characteristics remained symptomatic in virtually all state sectors. Having

repeatedly failed to demonstrate a propensity to put its house in order, Shevardnadze's regime was losing the attention of the West.

Consequently, although Georgia had momentarily become a high-profile arena in the war on terror, and although it staunchly backed the United States in its invasion and occupation of Iraq, Georgia's relations with the West deteriorated in the two years after 11 September and the country had come no closer to a favourable resolution of its conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As the United States lent its support in 2003 to a democratic process that could revive Georgia's fortunes, Shevardnadze appeared to prefer making his peace with Russia after a five-year hiatus, gaining Russian political backing in return for permanent economic dependence (including permitting the sale of the main energy distribution company from a US business to a Russian one and signing a secret deal with the Russian gas company Gazprom that would surrender control over Georgia's gas distribution network in exchange for subsidised gas supplies).

Would such a "rapprochement" between Georgia and Russia have led to a resolution of the South Ossetia and Abkhazia conflicts? Given the experience of the 1990s, it would appear unlikely. However, thanks to the "Rose Revolution" of November 2003, in which Shevardnadze was deposed following mass demonstrations over alleged ballot-rigging in parliamentary elections, the answer will never be known.

### **Saakashvili's New Broom**

With the collapse of the Shevardnadze government, Georgia hoped to turn course. The new president, Mikhail Saakashvili, elected in January 2004, embarked on a number of key state reforms. In foreign policy, he promised to pursue an open and mutually beneficial relationship with Russia while continuing to seek greater integration with Europe and NATO.

Saakashvili also pledged to adopt a new approach to conflict resolution in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Primarily, he sought to offer a number of incentives to persuade the two breakaway territories that Tbilisi wished to negotiate their re-entry into Georgia in good faith. Rather than flatly denounce Moscow's policy of granting Russian citizenship to residents of the two regions, for example, Georgia suggested it would accept this as a *fait accompli*, legalising dual citizenship rather than resisting it.

This, however, was just the start. Although Shevardnadze had repeatedly expressed willingness to resolve the conflicts peacefully and through federalism, during his presidency Georgia did little to bring solutions nearer. In the case of South Ossetia, it had consistently refused to recognise even the territory's name, let alone its legal status. While Shevardnadze did recognise Abkhazia's autonomy, the situation was complicated by the existence of an "Abkhazian parliament in exile", made up of ethnic Georgians who had fled Abkhazia in 1993. This "parliament in exile" was in charge of refugee affairs and inflated the number of displaced persons (mainly by keeping deceased individuals on the list of registered refugees) with a view to directing more government money into its own coffers. Another aggravating factor was the occasional incursions into Abkhazia of two Georgian "guerrilla" groups, one of which cynically moonlighted as the Abkhazians' illegal trading partners. Generally, Shevardnadze refused to take on Georgian interests that benefited in either region from the black market trade in fuel, cigarettes, and other products (including arms and narcotics).

Upon coming to power, Saakashvili announced an alternative path on both conflicts. In an unprecedented public shift, he declared Georgia's 1990 abolition of South Ossetian autonomy a "mistake", promised to grant the former autonomous "district" greater status as an autonomous "republic", and restored the name "South Ossetia" to official usage. The government also promised to assist Ossetian refugees who had fled from Georgia and appointed a South Ossetian who had been living in Russia as a deputy minister and subsequently minister of civil integration.

Similar efforts were directed towards resolving the conflict in Abkhazia. Tbilisi disbanded guerrilla groups, reorganised and restaffed the belligerent and corrupt exile leadership, launched a process to grant permanent homes to numerous refugees, and ordered a new census to cap their official growth. The Georgian government also agreed to receive the recommendations of a group of political and intellectual elites for a federal solution to the conflict that made no precise demands regarding the timing and extent of refugee repatriation.

Simultaneously with the confidence-building measures, however, Tbilisi launched an ill-conceived plan that detracted from such innovations. Following on the heels of the successful dislodging in May 2004 of a corrupt, non-democratic regime in the Georgian autonomous republic of Ajaria on the south-eastern coast of the Black Sea, Tbilisi presumed that extending its “war on corruption” to South Ossetia could bring about a similar demise of that region’s leadership, which it viewed as hopelessly corrupt, as clients of Russia, and as the sole impediment to striking a deal on integration. The plan called for cracking down on the voluminous wholesale contraband trade flowing from Russia via South Ossetia by establishing Georgian “financial police” checkpoints in the conflict zone and closing the informal Ergneti market located just south of the region, where Georgians and Ossetians had traded duty-free wares “illegally” for years. While this anti-smuggling drive aimed to undercut the local regime’s financial base, it also meant that Tbilisi counted on ordinary Ossetian traders, whose livelihood depended on this trade, to direct their frustration at the South Ossetian leadership, not at Georgia. To demonstrate its goodwill to the local population during what would admittedly be a difficult transition, Georgia offered fertilisers, pensions, and onsite medical assistance to the residents of South Ossetia. It also promised to restore the railroad line connecting the region to Tbilisi.

While Georgia’s confidence-building measures represented a notable advance on past approaches, this last plan suffered from a number of flaws. Most importantly, Georgia miscalculated Russia’s stance. After coming to terms with the initial results of the Rose Revolution, including the defeat of a pro-Russian regime in Ajaria, Moscow resisted Georgian efforts to resolve the South Ossetian conflict, particularly as a success there was likely to mean a similar attempt would be made in Abkhazia, whose independence Russia had especially come to value. Consequently, the Russian government issued a huge number of communiqués, often daily, denouncing Georgian activities in the South Ossetian conflict zone and threatening interference. It allowed truckfuls of weapons (including missiles) and armed volunteers from the North Caucasus to cross the Russian border into South Ossetia to “defend” the local population. Russia also blocked all proposals to change the format of the peacekeeping mission, refusing, for example, to allow the OSCE presence in South Ossetia, restricted to the southern half of the region, to be extended to the north or just to the Roki tunnel connecting South Ossetia to Russia. In South Ossetia, as well as in Abkhazia, Russia accelerated the process of granting its citizenship to local residents, using the increased citizen rolls to justify further involvement in the regions’ affairs.

Besides underestimating Russia’s response, Tbilisi also failed to see (or disregarded) the fact that the South Ossetian leadership could convincingly portray to its own people Georgian actions as evidence of new aggression. South Ossetians had grown accustomed to interacting with their Georgian neighbours and engaging in trade with the Georgian population outside South Ossetia. Faced with an armed crackdown on this trade, the South Ossetian leadership did not have to work hard to convince the local population that Georgia had reversed course on maintaining peaceful coexistence. With increased Russian involvement and the start of sporadic shooting, the conflict escalated and Georgia began to use military forces, not just the police, to occupy and protect Georgian-populated villages in South Ossetia. Over the course of summer 2004, low-level fighting broke out several times between Georgian forces and South Ossetians seeking to undermine what they perceived to be Georgian offensive positions. While South Ossetian fatalities were not publicly reported (and evidently few), officially seventeen Georgian servicemen died, many of them victims of Ossetian snipers.

Finally, Georgia underestimated US opposition to an armed engagement in South Ossetia. The military forces that Georgia had inserted into the conflict zone were, in fact, GTEP-trained. However, thanks to the original understanding that Georgia would not use these soldiers for an offensive explicitly against Abkhazia only, as well as the fact that the operation in South Ossetia was not strictly an offensive one, US officials expressed little concern that Georgia was employing GTEP troops in South Ossetia. But they did voice grave concern that Georgia was placing itself in a situation that could lead to a sustained armed conflict which, especially given Russia's involvement, the Georgians might not win and certainly not without significant casualties on both sides. As the fighting escalated, US officials communicated to Tbilisi that it could not count on US support if it sought to resolve the situation in South Ossetia through force. Ultimately, Saakashvili heeded this warning: after a brief, dramatic offensive Georgia withdrew its troops, apart from the five hundred-man peacekeeping contingent it was permitted (but which Shevardnadze had never fully utilised).

On South Ossetia, the United States followed Russia's lead. Georgia's interest in cracking down on smuggling through South Ossetia was justifiable, but blatantly combining this task with the goal of toppling the South Ossetian regime was ill advised. Russia capitalised on Georgia's mistake, deepening Georgian distrust and ensuring a rise of insecurity between Georgians and Ossetians. Faced with the spectre of conflict, the United States implicitly backed the Russian position: Georgia needed to work through existing mechanisms of conflict resolution to achieve its goals.

After the South Ossetian flare-up, Russia took no chances of losing Abkhazia. Georgia had already upset the Abkhazians and Moscow during the summer, when Saakashvili responded to the establishment of a new ferry service for Russian tourists to the territory by declaring not only that boat traffic to Abkhazia would be strictly monitored and, when necessary, detained by the Georgian coast guard, but also that boats travelling to Abkhazia would be fired upon, including those carrying Russian tourists, if they refused to stop.

Surprisingly, however, it was not this that prompted greater Russian involvement in Abkhazia but political developments internal to the territory. When Russia's preferred candidate in an October 2004 local presidential election, Raul Khadzhimba, Abkhazia's incumbent prime minister, lost, Moscow refused to accept the results, rejecting the decisions of Abkhazia's central election commission, legislature, and supreme court. With its position weakening under similar circumstances in Ukraine, Russia imposed a blockade on Abkhazia and subsequently brokered a deal whereby Abkhazia's presumptive leader, Sergei Bagapsh, ran on a joint ticket with his defeated opponent in a new election in January 2005. With this bizarre compromise, control over Abkhazia's internal politics was conceded to Bagapsh as president, while his vice-president, Khadzhimba, was to possess authority over security and foreign affairs, ensuring Moscow's continued oversight of Abkhazia's independent development. The United States, for its part, issued no comment regarding Russian manipulation of the Abkhazian elections; by international standards, they were in any case invalid.

Georgia has consistently lobbied the United States to take a more active role in resolving the conflicts. First, however, the Bush administration placed the onus on Georgia to step up to the negotiating table, urging it to produce detailed proposals for political settlements that could be used as a basis for further discussion. At last, at a January 2005 meeting of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, Saakashvili unveiled the key principles of a new peace initiative for South Ossetia. These included promises for an autonomous government and parliament; representation in national branches of government; funds for economic and cultural development; co-operative economic agreements with Russian regions; commissions to deal with the history and consequences of the 1990–2 conflict, including on property restitution; and joint police forces and the gradual integration of Ossetian forces into a united Georgian army.

The plan specified a preferable division of labour for outside actors interested in helping to promote conflict resolution in Georgia. With a nod to his hosts, Saakashvili asked for the Council

of Europe to act as a peace “facilitator”. However, he proposed that the real institutional work be taken on by the OSCE, which would enlarge its monitoring responsibilities, and by the European Union, a newly interested actor, which would serve in the hefty role of guarantor of a peace agreement. The United States would be a “peace supporter”, while Russia was to serve as a welcome “partner for peace”.

With this initiative, Georgia put the ball back in the West’s court, asking the United States and Europe to do more to promote political settlements with South Ossetia and, subsequently, Abkhazia, and to help persuade Russia to accept a lesser position in the conflict-resolution process while continuing to play a vital role in the economic future of Georgia and the two territories.

## **A Role for the West?**

Leaving aside appreciation for Georgia’s contribution to the war and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq (by 2005, Georgia had sent more than eight hundred servicemen to Iraq), there are a number of reasons why the United States, together with Europe, might want to push more actively for negotiated solutions to the South Ossetia and Abkhazia conflicts. First, greater Western involvement would give peace negotiations a better chance of success. Thanks to Russian support for the de facto independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the balance of negotiating power between Georgia and the breakaway regions has been too skewed to tell if an opportunity to promote peaceful reunification even exists. Currently, the regional leaderships do not need to enter into negotiations that will result in any kind of settlement other than one that institutionalises their status as Russian protectorates. Western states have no reason to believe that by allowing the peace process to remain under Russian guidance, while they support Georgia quietly or from the side, the talks will tip towards a point where Abkhazia and South Ossetia will have to consider negotiating away their de facto separation from Georgia. To give peace settlements a chance, the West must get more involved.

Second, as US diplomats have begun more frequently to assert, breakaway regions are potential threats to European security. Via Turkey, Georgia lies on NATO’s eastern border. It also sits across the Black Sea from two other NATO (and soon-to-be EU) members, Bulgaria and Romania. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are not bound by international treaties or law. Their peculiar relations with Russia have encouraged the unregulated possession and transit of weapons, drugs, and other smuggled goods. Linking the existence of these “lawless” enclaves directly to international terrorism or proliferation of weapons of mass destruction may be hasty. Still, Western governments increasingly recognise that maintaining the status quo can exacerbate, not reduce, security concerns at Europe’s edge.

Unresolved conflicts also promote insecurity within the Caucasus. Smuggling, trafficking, and the unrestricted movement of armed irregulars are especially problematic in an energy-transit region connecting readily by land to Iran and by sea to Central Asia. Georgia’s unresolved conflicts, moreover, are the single biggest obstacle to the normalisation of Russian–Georgian relations—even more so than the issue of Russia’s military bases. Russia and Georgia have inched towards open conflict before, over the latter’s alleged harbouring of Chechen militants. Their relations will remain tense and potentially dangerous until the questions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia are resolved in a way that frees Georgia and Russia to concentrate on normal and desirable economic relations.

Finally, resolving the conflicts will give a huge boost to Georgia’s democratic development. Georgia has demonstrated a propensity to become a “post-nationalist” state founded on civic principles—a remarkable achievement for a political culture that was still pervaded by exclusivist ethnic rhetoric a few years ago. Like other multiethnic eastern European states that have joined NATO and the European Union, Georgia is prepared to offer political agreements that will fairly integrate breakaway regions and minority populations and allow them to retain valued links with

countries and societies abroad. Additionally, resolving the conflicts will reduce the ability of Georgian politicians to play the nationalist card in lieu of responsible political reform and action. If the West wants to produce and maintain success stories in multiethnic democracy promotion at relatively low cost, stepping up efforts to help Georgia resolve its separatist conflicts should be a priority.

Against these considerations, those who advocate caution about greater Western involvement can choose from at least four arguments to support their position. The first is that continued Russian hegemony in Georgia and other CIS states remains a trade-off for broader geostrategic considerations. NATO and the European Union have already expanded to Russia's borders in the north and across the Black Sea. The United States wants Russia to remain a useful partner in the war on terrorism and in nuclear non-proliferation. Europe seeks to maintain good relations with Russia as a key supplier of gas and oil. From this perspective, if Georgians want their country reunited, their priority should be to identify, and accommodate, Russian terms for reintegration.

A second argument is that Georgia should accept that all good things do not necessarily go together. Georgia has expended significant effort, with Western backing, to convince Russia to shut down its last two military bases in southern Georgia. In May 2005, this effort at last produced results. Retreating from previous claims that Russia needed a decade or more to close its bases, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov issued a joint declaration with his Georgian counterpart, Salome Zourabichvili, paving the way for Russian personnel and material to begin withdrawing soon from the bases, and for the bases to be fully shut down in 2008. If this commitment is a sign that Russia is willing to rethink its goal of maintaining its geopolitical supremacy in the Caucasus, or at least its strategies for doing so, then a combination of external pressures and incentives might further compel Russia to withdraw from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, a more realistic prospect is that Russia will now hunker down in those last areas of Georgia where it is welcome. The withdrawal of Russian military bases may be the sole achievement Georgia can realistically aspire to in the short term.

A third argument (or, perhaps more accurately, justification) is that the principle of territorial integrity need not always trump that of self-determination. Much has been made of Russia's double standard as regards its war over Chechnya—which Moscow views strictly as an internal affair—and Georgia's efforts to reinforce its territorial integrity. That a large power like Russia holds this double standard is not surprising. Critics in the West should bear in mind that their countries supported the independence of East Timor from Indonesia and also openly serve as protectors of Serbia's breakaway region of Kosovo and as guarantors of the security and development of China's breakaway region of Taiwan. While the motives of the West may be different from Russia's, and the difference in population size of the "breakaway" regions stark, the general rule is the same: formal recognition of separatist regions is rare, but it does occur. When it does not, large powers sometimes still perpetuate their de facto independence. If the West does not wish to force Kosovo and Taiwan to sit alone at the negotiating table with Serbia and China, it may as well accept that Russia chooses not to leave its clients to face Georgia on their own.

A final argument is that South Ossetia and Abkhazia are now de facto states that can be expected steadfastly to resist reunification with Georgia, much as any independent state would reject political unification with another. They place a high value on their independence and, regardless of Russian backing, are unlikely to agree voluntarily to reincorporation into Georgia. Even if Tbilisi proves generous in original autonomy agreements—and as regards South Ossetia it already has—Ossetians and Abkhazians will suspect that Georgia will use these agreements over time as springboards to subordinate the regions ever more firmly to central rule.

In the case of Abkhazia, this so-called commitment problem is especially strong. Officially, Georgia insists on a political settlement that provides for the return to Abkhazia of at least 80 per cent of the 220,000 Georgian refugees. Getting Abkhazians to agree to a solution that reunites

their land with Georgia and accommodates the return of so many Georgians will be a formidable task.

Given this, at least in Abkhazia, we cannot exclude the threat of war, even if Russia were to adopt a more constructive position. When confronted with the return of some 175,000 Georgians, Abkhazians might very well choose to fight, even if the odds of victory were slim, rather than again become a minority in what they consider to be their own land (ethnic Abkhazians numbered 93,000 in 1989 in the last official census). To rule war out definitively, Georgia would have to reduce its demands for substantial refugee repatriation to areas other than Abkhazia's southernmost, Georgian-dominated, region of Gali, or reach agreement with the Abkhazians on separating Gali from Abkhazia. Without either of these solutions, Abkhazians are unlikely to agree peacefully to reunification with Georgia, no matter what other benefits they may be promised.

## **Dealing with Moscow**

Thanks to these latter considerations, the United States and Europe may wish to continue moving cautiously in pushing for a solution to Georgia's territorial conflicts.

Even so, this does not mean leaving a solution in the hands of Moscow alone. One alternative is to welcome Russian-inspired proposals for reunification as a basis for negotiation and work steadily to revise them in ways that recognise a Russian role as mediator and guarantor, but that also allow for the continued strengthening of Georgia without predetermining its ultimate geopolitical position. This road is a long, uncertain one with many bumps. But it does keep alive the possibility of settlements with Russia's co-operation.

Another alternative is to seek to normalise the conflict zones, rather than strive for a settlement within a Russian-dominated process. Western policymakers can urge Georgia to move forward with administrative and economic reforms without worrying about reunification. They can also suggest ways to prevent the absence of a solution from blocking those reforms (for example, they could devise and support customs regimes that do not isolate Abkhazia and South Ossetia but also do not allow their de facto independence to distort negatively Georgia's economic development). In addition, they can try to improve transparency and the rule of law in the breakaway regions. Democratisation and the subduing of illegal activity will help reduce the negative effects of conflict, address potential international security concerns, and conceivably even promote a permanent political settlement. Ideally, such reforms, matched by the opportunity to join in Georgia's successes and in its increasing ties with the European Union, would dilute the desire of South Ossetians and Abkhazians to rely on Russia alone as a guarantor of their development.

Normalisation, however, does have its risks. While the overall objective would be to provide a sensible "fit" for the reunification of Abkhazia and South Ossetia with Georgia by aligning progress in governance and state-building reform and by fostering a natural sense of interdependence, normalisation can backfire in granting de facto independence an even greater legitimacy and a stronger economic foundation. It may also promote the continued integration of these regions with Russia and obstruct a large-scale return of refugees to Abkhazia. Rather than being a way station to reunification with Georgia, normalisation could end up becoming a stepping stone to real independence.

If normalisation is too uncertain or long-term a strategy, the alternative—short of advocating war—is to make conflict resolution in Georgia (and in Moldova) a priority in Western-Russian relations. The United States and the European Union can communicate to Moscow that the West fully backs the reunification of Abkhazia and South Ossetia with Georgia and deems unacceptable all efforts to prevent this. They can also insist on revising the existing mediation and peacekeeping structures to internationalise them more authentically. For example, the existing UN and OSCE mandates could be altered to provide direct slots for the United States, European

countries, or Turkey—Georgia’s neighbour and home to a large Abkhazian diaspora community. An alternative would be to push through entirely new mandates, as Saakashvili has suggested, that allow a greater role for the European Union.

Naturally, such a policy confronts a few unknowns. Will the US–Russian and EU–Russian partnerships be endangered, needlessly and irreparably, by a stronger stance in support of Georgia? Can Western states persuade or pressure Russia to change its policies towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia, or at least the format for peacekeeping and mediation? If Russia refuses to budge, what will be the consequences of efforts to revise the peacekeeping and mediation formats without Russian participation?

In past years, these questions hardly arose thanks to the co-operative framework in which US and EU relations with Russia have been set. Now, however, Russian political and economic developments are progressing in ways that are independently promoting a more nuanced assessment of Russia’s partnerships with the West. Meanwhile, not only Georgia but two other buffer states between the expanded NATO and Russia (Ukraine and Moldova) are expressing a keen desire for increased integration with the West. It is time to ponder these questions directly.

### **South Ossetia First?**

The United States has been responsive to Georgia’s South Ossetia peace initiative. Within weeks of its declaration in January 2005, US diplomats were expressing approval of it and a willingness to take part in its realisation. Commenting on a February phone conversation between Bush and Saakashvili, White House spokesperson Scott McClellan noted that the leaders had talked of the Georgian government’s “serious” plan to “resolve its separatist conflict in South Ossetia”. In a historic visit to Georgia in May 2005, after attending ceremonies in Moscow to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany, President Bush affirmed that the peace plan seemed to him “to be a very reasonable proposition”.

Still, the initiative has got off to a slow start. While the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission agreed to review the initiative, the United States has embraced the plan less warmly than it could have. Since its unveiling, US officials have been concerned that Georgia may not really be as committed to peaceful conflict resolution as its initiative would indicate. Wary of a resurgence of violence, and taking note of Georgia’s steady military build-up, the United States has consistently sought to convey the message that only peaceful solutions are acceptable.

Thus, in a March 2005 Senate hearing on the countries of the Black Sea region, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State John Tefft—shortly thereafter appointed US ambassador to Georgia—voiced staunch support for Moldova against the “repressive Transdniestrian separatists” that impede efforts to “strengthen” Moldova’s territorial integrity. All Tefft offered Georgia, however, was the observation that “the international community should ... encourage Georgia to resolve [its] conflicts peacefully”. According to Tefft, the State Department’s prescription for conflict resolution in Georgia is simply that the latter continue “internal reform”, which will “strengthen [Georgia’s] economy and create incentives for the separatist regions to integrate into Georgia”.

This lack of a strong US commitment to conflict resolution in Georgia was reaffirmed at the highest level during President Bush’s visit in May 2005. On the one hand, Bush lavished praise on Georgia, lauding it as “a beacon of liberty” around the world in the wake of the Rose Revolution. But as regards Georgia’s territorial conflicts, Bush offered the usual platitudes and did not commit the United States to taking a more active role in resolving the disputes. Instead, he emphasised how important it was that Georgia resolve its conflicts by purely peaceful means. Accompanying Bush, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stressed that the main drivers for reintegration should be Georgia’s own democratisation and economic growth, not a negotiation process mediated by outsiders.

The United States can do better than this. Georgia, having unveiled its South Ossetia peace initiative with great fanfare, awaits a patron to help move this initiative forward against the opposition of the South Ossetian authorities and their Russian backer. Cautioning Georgia against a resort to arms while counselling patience may reassure the Abkhazians and South Ossetians, but it does not mean they will be more prepared to negotiate away their independence. In the worst case, it could even end up having a result directly opposite to the one Washington intends: it may convince Georgia that only by threatening or using military force can it hasten an end to conflict.

Far more preferable than the current US stance would be Washington's clear commitment to a dual-track approach that seeks in the short term to achieve the reunification of South Ossetia with Georgia, while normalising the conflict in Abkhazia. This would be in line with Tbilisi's own apparent strategy: determined to reincorporate both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia has repeatedly acknowledged the greater difficulties presented by the former, and in practice has twice adopted a sequential approach—in the “war on smuggling” and in its new peace initiative.

Leaving aside issues of history and sentiment, tackling the reintegration of South Ossetia first makes sense. South Ossetia is demographically, geographically, and economically more integrated with Georgia than is Abkhazia. Large Ossetian minority communities continue to live in areas outside South Ossetia, even after the significant refugee flows of the 1991–2 conflict. South Ossetia is located within Georgian territory like a jigsaw-puzzle piece, and its mountainous valleys connect to each other mainly in the lowland south. The region is linked to Russia, on the other hand, via a single manmade tunnel, the Roki pass, that artificially cuts through the Caucasus mountain range. Already, Georgia controls up to 40 per cent of South Ossetian territory, and could capture more if necessary. Reunification would also present South Ossetia with significant rewards. Besides pledged reconstruction, there will be considerable benefits from trade, transport, and tourism for its population of seventy thousand, whose home will serve as a major transit route between Russia and Georgia.

Also, the reintegration of South Ossetia, unlike Abkhazia's, poses no challenges to conventional understandings of democracy and human rights. South Ossetians will enjoy autonomous, democratic self-rule, shared by the ethnic Georgians who also live in the region and make up less than one-third of the population. In Abkhazia, however, there remains a trade-off between self-rule and democracy and human rights, as long as Georgia insists on the return of enough refugees to transform the ethnic balance in the territory. Such a return might be a victory for democracy and human rights, but it would be a blow to Abkhazian self-rule. Untangling this knot will require considerable care.

Resolving South Ossetia first, of course, does highlight the risks of promoting normalisation in Abkhazia instead of simultaneously pushing for a final political settlement there. By accepting the current situation—and helping Abkhazia improve its own state qualities—normalisation may strengthen Abkhazia's case for independence, not weaken it. In such an eventuality, Georgia and its supporters will have to work harder to insist they have not given up the imperative of reunification with Abkhazia. Eventually, thanks to the fruits of normalisation, Abkhazians may reciprocate and agree to hammer out a proposal that allows them substantial autonomy within the confines of a single, internationally recognised state. Alternatively, if Georgia succeeds in its development path and gains security and stature via membership of NATO, and as more refugees are successfully resettled, Georgians themselves may decide that a Benelux-type association with an independent Abkhazia is both a realistic and tolerable goal.

Overall, it is too early to predict the course of conflict resolution in Abkhazia. In the meantime, US and European efforts to promote the reunification of South Ossetia with Georgia are proper and beneficial. By balancing the Russian balancer, the United States and Europe can give peace a chance to produce lasting political settlements in the fragmented southern Caucasus.