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Renewed Confrontation in Georgia

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INTRODUCTION

Although the likelihood of a full-blown war between Russia and Georgia is low, one cannot rule out renewed confrontation between the two countries in the next twelve to eighteen months. Since Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, tensions have periodically resurfaced over the disputed area of South Ossetia; Russia has never fulfilled its obligations under the Six-Point Cease-Fire Agreement (also known as the Sarkozy Plan) that ended the fighting. It has granted citizenship to South Ossetians and moved territorial markers in Russia's favor, all of which Georgians describe as creeping annexation. Russian trade cutoffs and interference with the oil pipeline that runs through Georgia, as well as alleged cyberattacks, have been other sources of friction. The current Georgian government has sought to improve relations with Moscow, and Russian President Vladimir Putin, in his 2015 end-of-year press conference, indicated an interest in restoring normal ties between the two countries. But upcoming events, such as the July 2016 Warsaw North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit and Georgian parliamentary elections later in the fall, could trigger renewed tensions and even a military crisis. Depending on how Georgia's status as a prospective member is handled at the NATO summit, the Kremlin could decide to ramp up pressure against Tbilisi. Should the United National Movement (UNM) party of former President Mikhail Saakashvili, whom Putin loathes, look poised to win parliamentary elections, Russia might intervene to prevent or respond to such an outcome.

With U.S.-Russia relations already at their lowest point since the end of the Cold War, renewed confrontation between Russia and Georgia would make matters considerably worse. The reset policy of the Obama administration in early 2009 essentially closed the short chapter on Russia's invasion of Georgia months before. That was before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, starting in late February 2014, and Russian military action in Syria starting last fall. That backdrop has produced a level of Western frustration, distrust, and suspicion toward Moscow unprecedented in the post-Cold War period; in fact, some leaders in both Russia and the United States talk about a new Cold War. Renewed conflict between Russia and Georgia in 2016 would likely trigger more sanctions against Moscow and a U.S. and European bolstering of Russia's NATO and non-NATO neighbors. Such a development would also be much more difficult for a new American administration to ignore and would have wider implications on what is left of U.S.-Russian and Russian-European relations; it could lead to an extended chill in relations, bordering on a Cold War atmosphere. Thus, the United States has a strong interest in helping to prevent the situation between Russia and Georgia from deteriorating further and aggravating an already difficult U.S.-Russia relationship.

THE CONTINGENCIES

Renewed confrontation between Georgia and Russia could arise in several ways and manifest itself, much like in 2008, with the mobilization and deployment of armed forces by each side against one

another, potentially violent clashes that result in the loss of life and the displacement of large numbers of civilians, as well as other dangerous interactions short of sustained combat operations. Three scenarios in particular deserve attention:

Escalation from Russian assertiveness. In this contingency, Russia would act out of a sense of confidence that it can get away with renewed aggression against Georgia without incurring a serious response from the West, much as it did in 2008. The Kremlin could decide to wield a variety of political, economic, and even military tools with the goal of sowing discord within NATO and discrediting U.S. and Western commitments to countries in Eurasia, while also keeping Georgia within its sphere of influence. This scenario might include additional efforts to move farther the demarcation lines between South Ossetia and Georgia proper, accelerating the “passportization” of residents in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and announcing the territories’ formal annexation into the Russian Federation, as has occurred with the Crimean region of Ukraine.

Russia could feel emboldened if NATO demonstrates little interest in Georgia at its summit in Warsaw, just as Georgia’s failure in 2008 to secure a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP), seen as the stepping-stone to eventual alliance membership, may have opened the way for the Russian invasion that followed four months later. Perversely, a decision by Georgia not to request a MAP in Warsaw in 2016—avoiding the possibility of a second rejection—risks being interpreted by Moscow as a green light to do what it wants with Georgia once again. As then Georgian Foreign Minister and now newly appointed Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili said, “Keeping Georgia out of a membership action plan only encourages our northern neighbor to be much more decisive in its steps. Suspension of the issue creates problems; it does not solve the problems.”

Escalation from Russian defensiveness. In this scenario, a Kremlin feeling besieged on the domestic and/or foreign policy fronts might want to distract the attention of the Russian population by moving against its Caucasus neighbor. Accordingly, acting out of a sense of defensiveness, the Kremlin could seek to deny Georgia the possibility of moving closer to the West, NATO, and the European Union (EU); to increase the likelihood of a desired outcome to the parliamentary elections; and to divert the focus from domestic difficulties in Russia.

Thus, in anticipation of NATO’s offering Georgia the prospect of closer ties (even if such anticipation is based on a misreading of alliance intentions), Moscow could take preemptive action to undermine alliance unanimity. This could involve taking action in Abkhazia or South Ossetia to demonstrate to the West that Georgia is not in full control of its territory—ordinarily a basic prerequisite to NATO membership. It could also entail other demonstrations of Russian power, including hybrid warfare tactics, to unnerve NATO members and convince them that Georgia is not realistically defensible.

In this second scenario, Russia may anticipate a defeat in the fall 2016 elections of the Georgian Dream party (GD; the party currently in power), which it prefers over the UNM (Saakashvili’s party). In response, Moscow may look to tip the scale—through heightened economic pressure or military buildup along the border—in favor of the GD to prevent the return to power of a party perceived to be less friendly to Russia.

Finally, even with public opinion surveys supposedly showing Putin with high levels of support, a precipitous drop in his approval rating cannot be ruled out if, for example, Russia’s economy crashes or its military suffers serious setbacks in Ukraine and/or Syria. These possibilities would leave Putin looking for new distractions to deflect the attention of the Russian population and Georgia could

well become that distraction. Should there be terrorist attacks on Russian soil as a result of Putin's actions in Syria, there is also the possibility that Georgia could be blamed for allowing extremists to transit through the Pankisi Gorge. Tensions over the gorge peaked more than a decade ago when Russia accused the former Georgian government of allowing Chechen fighters to travel through the area. Outside mediation was required to calm tensions. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in his January 26, 2016, press conference made ominous statements about terrorist threats emanating from there, specifically that the self-proclaimed Islamic State is using the gorge for "training, recreation, and replenishment of supplies." Georgian officials immediately rejected Lavrov's claim.

Escalation due to actions—inadvertent or not—of local actors. It remains possible that local authorities in South Ossetia and Abkhazia could take actions designed to deepen relations with Moscow, and even push for secession from Georgia. South Ossetian leader Leonid Tibilov has proposed holding a referendum on whether the Georgian breakaway territory should join Russia; this follows an "alliance and integration treaty" signed by Tibilov and Putin in March 2015. A "treaty" also exists between Russia and Abkhazia, the other unrecognized breakaway region, though there is a greater sense of separate identity among Abkhazians and less support for annexation by Russia.

Indeed, South Ossetia remains a bigger concern than Abkhazia, as it is much more dependent on Russia for its survival. The degree of control Moscow has over Tibilov and others is significant; however, leaders in South Ossetia might also risk actions on their own, thinking that Moscow will have no choice but to come to their aid as they did in 2008. The possibility that Georgian authorities would launch provocations against Russia can be ruled out; Tbilisi has zero interest in stirring the pot with Moscow.

MAP OF GEORGIA, SHOWING SOUTH OSSETIA AND ABKHAZIA



Source: Central Intelligence Agency.

WARNING INDICATORS

Several warning signs could suggest that the risk of renewed confrontation in Georgia is growing. Some apply to all three scenarios outlined above—notably an increasing rhetorical focus on Georgia from the Kremlin and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the movement of military forces to

the region, increasing cyberattacks, and various forms of economic interference—whereas other indicators reflect more specific motivations. Moscow’s messaging toward the NATO summit, in particular, should be carefully scrutinized for what it may reveal of Russia’s intentions. The same is also true of its posture toward Abkhazia and South Ossetia, regardless of whether it accelerates efforts to change their statuses. Efforts to use Georgia to distract the Russian public from domestic difficulties could be presaged, for example, by talk in Moscow that NATO is about to expand to include Georgia, even though such an invitation is not in the offing. Other signs to look for in this case would be deployment of Russian ships in the Black Sea, buildup of troops along the border, and fabricated calls from South Ossetia (and, less likely, Abkhazia) to protect it from NATO’s “hostile invasion.” In addition, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov’s comments regarding the Pankisi Gorge should not be dismissed out of hand.

An eye should be kept on separatist leaders, who may call for Russian assistance or provoke Georgian leaders, forcing Moscow’s hand. An increasingly chaotic scene domestically in Georgia, including rising tensions between the UNM and GD parties, wide-scale arrests of protestors and/or more opposition leaders, and a further media crackdown could trigger Moscow to go into Georgia to “preserve order and stability” and to protect ethnic Russians or Russian speakers, which were reasons cited for the move into Crimea.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. INTERESTS

Renewed confrontation between Russia and Georgia would badly damage already frayed relations between Moscow and Washington. It would further reduce the already limited prospects of cooperation on a range of international issues including nonproliferation and counterterrorism, as well as various diplomatic initiatives in the Middle East and elsewhere. It could unleash a new round of American and European sanctions against Moscow and trigger movement of U.S. and NATO naval forces into the Black Sea region (as was done in 2008) as a deterrent against further aggression, and with that a spike in tensions between Russia and the West. It would also lead to further efforts to bolster NATO allies in Europe that in turn could lead to a hardening of a new adversarial relationship between NATO and Russia.

Depending on how Washington responded to a new Georgian crisis, the credibility of U.S. commitments to maintaining peace and security in Europe could be either enhanced or harmed. Although Georgia is not a treaty ally of the United States, NATO members are still likely to measure Washington’s commitment to their security by how it reacts to potential Russian assertiveness and aggression regardless of where it occurs in Europe. U.S. policy toward Georgia could be either reassuring to its allies or generate great uncertainty as to Washington’s larger intentions. Non-NATO countries with Euro-Atlantic aspirations could likewise be encouraged or disheartened by U.S. actions.

A major crisis in Georgia could also harm U.S.-Georgia relations. Georgia has been a major recipient of U.S. bilateral assistance; since 1991, it has received more than \$3 billion in aid—much of it coming after Russia’s invasion in 2008—to support the consolidation of Georgia’s democracy and free-market economy, as well as its eventual integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. While a crisis between Russia and Georgia would have little economic impact on the United States—though it could disrupt the flow of energy transiting through Georgia from Azerbaijan—it would do serious, destabilizing harm to Georgia’s economy. Georgia imports roughly 90 percent of its gas needs from Azerbaijan and has greatly reduced its dependency on Russia for energy over the past decade, although it has renewed talks with Gazprom in late 2015 about additional gas supplies.

U.S.-Georgia relations have gone through considerable change over the past decade. Even the close relationship that existed between U.S. President George W. Bush and President Saakashvili did not prevent war between Russia and Georgia in 2008, and the United States under President Barack Obama has kept a much greater distance. This remained the case even after Saakashvili's party lost the parliamentary elections in 2012, and he was forced to step down as president in 2013 due to term limits; he left the country shortly thereafter and is now serving as governor of Odessa in Ukraine. President Obama has not spoken with nor met Saakashvili's successor, President Giorgi Margvelashvili, since the latter's election more than two years ago, although U.S. Vice President Joe Biden has. In addition, European countries have shown little interest in matters involving Georgia beyond the signing of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement and Association Agreement in June 2014 and a visa liberalization agreement currently under discussion.

In January 2009, the United States and Georgia signed the Charter on Strategic Partnership. The fifth meeting under the charter occurred in November 2015, chaired by U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and former Vice Premier and Foreign Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. Georgia has been a major contributor to international operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, contributing the second-largest number of troops, after the United States, to NATO's mission in Afghanistan, with close to nine hundred soldiers still stationed there. Georgians arguably are the most pro-American and pro-Western population in the region, but if they perceive the United States as doing little to fend off Russian aggression, their attitudes could sour toward the West, a sentiment that could be repeated elsewhere in the region.

Finally, further violations of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity would undermine international norms and the post-Cold War order in Europe and jeopardize the vision of a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has already caused massive harm to this vision, but renewed confrontation between Russia and Georgia would further threaten stability in the Eurasia region, as well as create openings for illicit activity, organized crime, smuggling, and extremist forces.

PREVENTIVE OPTIONS

Given the implications for U.S. interests should there be renewed confrontation, the United States has strong interests in preventing such a flare-up, as do European allies, with whom the United States should work closely. Several steps, some of which are mutually exclusive, could be taken to avoid conflict:

- *Reduce explicit/implicit U.S. commitments to Georgia so as to lower the risk of being dragged into a conflict with Russia.* This option could reduce the possibility of Moscow's misreading of U.S. intentions and perceived provocations. The downsides of this approach are that it could embolden Russia to exploit what it perceives as weakness on the part of the West, alarm allies that the United States is disengaging from Europe, and create a sense in Georgia that it is being abandoned.
- *Clearly and consistently demonstrate U.S. support for Georgia at the highest levels.* This could happen through visits to Georgia by President Obama (after the Warsaw NATO summit, for example), Vice President Biden, and other senior U.S. officials to send a strong signal of support, while encouraging European counterparts to take similar steps. The cons to this approach are that it could be read in Moscow as provocative and a direct affront to Russia's sphere of interests.
- *State clearly that the door to NATO remains open and that not offering a MAP does not mean backing off from the 2008 Bucharest NATO Communiqué, which stated that Ukraine and Georgia would become members.* Under this option, the United States would explain to Moscow that Georgia's aspirations

to deepen ties with NATO and the EU are not a threat to Russia, though Putin's zero-sum thinking reduces the odds that such an approach would be effective. Moreover, Russia may view this as provocative and take action to underscore Georgia's indefensibility, weakening Georgia's prospects for ever joining the alliance.

- *Ramp up diplomatic involvement with both Tbilisi and Moscow with the goal of reducing irritants and tensions in Georgia-Russia relations.* This can be pursued bilaterally and multilaterally through confidence-building measures, using institutions such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). This approach would be using existing mechanisms, which have proven largely ineffective to date.
- *Encourage greater trade and interaction between Georgia and Russia by urging the removal of Russian trade barriers.* According to the Georgian Ministry of Economy, overall trade volume between the Republic of Georgia and the Russian Federation has been on the rise over the past several years, although the 2015 volume declined by almost 9 percent compared to the same period last year. Through the first nine months of 2015, total trade with Russia comprised \$530.3 million, or 7.3 percent of Georgia's overall foreign trade. The challenge to encouraging greater trade between the two countries is that it heightens Georgian dependence on Russia when Putin has shown a willingness to use trade and energy as political weapons.
- *Urge confidence-building measures among officials and civil society groups in Georgia and those in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.* A number of Abkhazians attended a soccer match in Tbilisi in 2015 without problems; building on such interactions could ameliorate Georgia-Abkhazia ties. Replicating that with South Ossetians would be harder to do, however, and that region is a likelier source of problems.
- *Beef up the independence of Georgia's economic and financial institutions to avoid heavy Russian influence and support efforts to develop Georgia's energy potential.* Given Russia's use of trade as a punitive measure against Georgia, it is important to maintain Georgia's relatively low economic dependence on Russia. Russia, however, could view a less economically and energy-dependent Georgia with a stronger economy as a break-away threat that should be reined in.
- *Bolster deterrence of Russian opportunism and aggression through closer bilateral military ties under the U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership, to include U.S. military aid to Georgia for its territorial defense, a boost in security for the pipeline that runs through Georgian territory, and an increased focus on security for the Black Sea region.* This could also include closer monitoring of the 2008 demarcation line through installation of cameras and use of drones. The risk in such an approach is that it could be perceived in Moscow as provocative and could spark a preemptive move on Russia's part.
- *Work actively with leading Georgian figures to prevent internecine political battles and encourage all sides to abide by democratic principles, due process, and free elections.* Georgia went through a peaceful transfer of power in 2012–2013, and that transition should be the model to follow.

MITIGATING OPTIONS

Were Russia to invade or ramp up its intimidation of Georgia again, the United States has several mitigating options it could pursue, each of which should be closely coordinated with the EU:

- *Principled protest but de facto acceptance of Russian actions to avoid escalation.* This option could include sanctions similar to those imposed for Russia's invasion of Ukraine and illegal annexation of

Crimea but no military response from the United States. The risk is that such a response could feed Russian ambitions, rather than satiate them.

- *Consensual de-escalation through mediation efforts—either by the United States or through encouragement of the EU or United Nations or OSCE efforts—to bring about a cease-fire and seek to restore the situation to the status quo ante.* The problem with this option is that much damage could be done in the time it takes to reach agreement on such mediation efforts.
- *Coercive de-escalation that would include diplomatic, economic, and/or military threats to force Russia to back down.* This could entail deployment of vessels to the Black Sea and the return to Georgia of any remaining Georgian soldiers stationed outside of the country on U.S. military aircraft. These steps were taken during the 2008 war and helped end the fighting. The risk with this option, of course, is a Russian escalation and a wider war.
- *Combination of carrots and sticks that would encourage mediation by imposition of new sanctions specifically related to Georgia.* China could be encouraged to use its influence with Russia and Georgia; after all, China is the third-largest foreign direct investor in Georgia and has decent ties with Moscow. China, however, may be reluctant to play such a role.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Some will argue that U.S.-Russia relations are too important—and already too strained—to add Georgia to the list of problems. The United States needs Russia to help resolve the crisis in Syria, and Georgia should not come in the way of those efforts. Moreover, they will claim, there is little the United States can do if Moscow decides to move militarily into or against Georgia.

But Russia's failure to fulfill its commitments under the Minsk cease-fire deal on Ukraine and its indiscriminate bombing of forces opposed to Bashar al-Assad in Syria that have been driving the flow of refugees into Europe belie arguments that Moscow can be helpful elsewhere. Furthermore, sacrificing Georgia's interests and aspirations, to say nothing of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, in an effort to win over Russia on other issues, including Ukraine and Syria, has significant downsides and is likely to fail, given the persistent difficulty of working with Russia, even before Georgia were to be added to the equation. It is in U.S. interests, after all, to maintain strong support for Georgia, as well as other countries bordering Russia. Doing so will preserve their sovereignty and territorial integrity and support their efforts to develop into democratic, market-oriented societies more integrated into the Euro-Atlantic community. Putin exploits weakness and wavering; he understands and respects strength, and that is the face the United States should show.

Renewed confrontation between Russia and Georgia in 2016, on top of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its military activities in Syria, likely would be met with a harsher reaction from both the Obama administration and an incoming American president. The overall atmosphere would be different—and worse—than it was in 2009 when the Obama administration offered a reset of relations with Moscow within months of Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia.

As NATO members, the Baltic states benefit from Article 5 security guarantees in which an attack on one ally is considered an attack against all. However, Georgia, like other countries neighboring Russia but not yet members of either NATO or the EU, finds itself in a dangerous gray zone; it aspires to join NATO, and the alliance stated in 2008 that it would become a member, but in this intervening period, it has no Article 5 security guarantees while it also resists Russian pressure to join any Moscow-led coalition. It remains prone to the unpredictability of Putin and faces Russian threats of various forms without having the assurance through Article 5 guarantees that other countries will come to its rescue

should confrontation resume. As with Ukraine, which NATO also stated would become a member, Georgia finds itself initially even more vulnerable to Russian pressure and aggression. And yet the United States and its NATO allies cannot remain indifferent to those aspiring countries that do not yet have Article 5 guarantees; doing so would consign them to a Russian sphere of interest and grant Moscow a de facto veto. Thus, to mitigate the risks and prevent a renewed outbreak in hostilities between Russia and Georgia, the United States should pursue the following recommendations:

- *Reinvigorate the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership by elevating U.S. participation above the deputy secretary of state level (as was done at the most recent meeting in November 2015).* The United States needs to show more interest in and concern for Georgia at the highest levels of the U.S. government. Failure to do so could be read in Moscow as a sign that the United States is not paying attention and that Russia can get away with more aggressive behavior.
- *Work with NATO to increase its presence in Georgia.* NATO's opening of a training center in the summer of 2015 is a good step in this direction. The United States should also beef up military aid to Georgia, specifically for territorial defense to include anti-tank weapons. It should also boost Black Sea security for Georgia and other countries in the region, as well as security for pipelines that cross Georgia. Together with allies, the United States should push back on Russia's efforts to redraw the demarcation line, which Georgia describes as "creeping annexation."
- *Together with allies, renew calls for full implementation of the 2008 Six-Point Cease-Fire Agreement including full Russian withdrawal of forces to pre-August 2008 positions.* Russia's failure to comply with this agreement has left Georgia even more vulnerable to pressure from its larger neighbor. It also has set a bad precedent for Russia's compliance with the Minsk cease-fire agreement in Ukraine.
- *At the NATO Warsaw Summit in June 2016, reiterate that the door to NATO remains wide open for countries that qualify and stress that territorial disputes should not exclude any country from candidacy (to do otherwise implies a Russian veto over Georgia's aspirations).* The United States should push NATO to demonstrate progress toward living up to the commitment to Georgia (and Ukraine) in the 2008 NATO communique, leading ultimately to Georgian membership down the road, assuming Tbilisi fulfills all the criteria for becoming a member. Officials should also make clear that a MAP is not a necessary step for acquiring full membership.
- *Make clear to Moscow that no country will recognize the annexation by Russia of South Ossetia and/or Abkhazia and reiterate that both are part of Georgia.* Moscow needs to understand that any moves toward annexation would lead to new sanctions, including possible expulsion from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication banking system and more targeted sanctions against officials at the highest levels, including Putin himself.
- *Support commercial efforts to develop the energy potential of Georgia to boost its economy and reinforce its independence from Russian energy imports.* The United States should encourage greater trade and investment through use of its trade promotion agencies.
- *Push the EU to make the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, signed in June 2014, a real free trade agreement by encouraging greater EU investment in and trade with Georgia.* The United States could also open discussions on such an agreement between Tbilisi and Washington.
- *Ensure that Georgia avoids dangerous political polarization and remains on the democratic path, especially with upcoming parliamentary elections.* The United States should stress the importance of and target assistance toward ensuring a level playing field, ending the politicization of the judicial process, and supporting strong and independent media and a vibrant civil society.

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