

# END OF RUSSIAN MILITARY BASES IN GEORGIA: SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND SECURITY IMPLICATIONS OF WITHDRAWAL

Kornely K. KAKACHIA

*Dean, School of Politics and International Relations,  
Tbilisi State University  
(Tbilisi, Georgia)*

## *I n t r o d u c t i o n*

The breakup of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War considerably changed the geopolitical situation in Eurasia and started a completely new process of a fundamental transformation of the world political system. The collapse of the Soviet order has created a unique opportunity for the countries of the Southern Caucasus to play a new and significant role as independent forces between the dominant Eurasian power in the north, Russia, and the rival powers in the south, Turkey and Iran. Nevertheless the Caucasus is still an area of conflict despite numerous peacekeeping activities in the region. The continuing competition between the West and Russia over mediation of the conflict creates new geopolitical obstacles for long-term stability and development of the region.

Russian military presence in the Caucasus continues to remain a significant challenge for the newly independent states. Its policy toward the Southern Caucasus has undergone significant changes and hardly be characterized as consistent. Military, political and economic presence has allowed Moscow to exert influence in the regions internal development, especially the course of the conflicts, cease-fires and negotiations. The triad by means of which Russia was safeguarding the interest of its security in the region—military bases, defense of the CIS external borders, peace-keeping—had by the end of decade started to

crack. While the concentration of the Russian forces in the Southern Caucasus was cut down, as of today Russia still remains the sole external state with the power readily to shape developments in the region.

During the Soviet period the Southern Caucasus as part of Soviet Union was fully integrated into its security system, with its share of army, navy and air force bases, border guard contingents and early warning systems. The Soviet Union had maintained a substantial military presence in Georgia as its geopolitical position always made Georgia strategically important and warranting the locating of numerous Soviet military bases within its territory. Since the republic bordered Turkey, a NATO member, the Transcaucasus Military District, which had coordinated Soviet military forces in the three republics of the Transcaucasus, was headquartered in Tbilisi. In mid-1993 an estimated 15,000 Russian troops and border guards remained on Georgian territory. Russia as successor state of Soviet Union inherited geopolitical interest in the Southern Caucasus and particularly in Georgia.

Georgia is important for Russia because of several reasons:

- a) it borders the unstable North Caucasus region of Russia (including the troublesome Republic of Chechnia), which

generates grave internal threats to Russia's security;

- b) Georgia plays an important role in the development of the mineral resources of the Caspian Basin (Georgian territory contains vital Black Sea ports and potential routes of Russia-controlled oil and gas pipelines).<sup>1</sup>

Additionally communications and pipelines linking Russia and pro-Russian Armenia run exclusively through Georgia.

After the collapse of Soviet Union at the beginning Georgia did not press the Russian troop withdrawal as vigorously as did other former republics of the Soviet Union because it did not have enough personnel to protect its entire border. However after the defeat in civil war with Abkhaz separatists (allegedly backed by Russian military circles) most Georgians saw Russia as an aggressor country that threatened Georgia's vital interests and territorial integrity. Sadly, this image of Russia still prevails in Georgian public opinion.

At present the Russian-Georgian relationship remains tense. Over the past five years, these relations have been characterized by tension, threats, recriminations, and mutual suspicion. President Saakashvili's unequivocally pro-Western orientation, in particular, Georgia's ambition to join NATO, and the recent promise that he will integrate Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Georgia by the end of his presidency cause outrage in Moscow. Russia for its part has been making life hard for Georgia and still continues its strategy of dragging out and stalling negotiations with Georgia. During a bout of extremely cold winter weather in 2006, Russian gas supplies to Georgia were cut off for prolonged repairs on a pipeline. A few months later, Russia banned the import of wine and mineral water from Georgia. Then, in September, Georgia arrested four Russian officers on charges of spying. This prompted Russia to suspend all direct transport and postal links, as well as to deport hundreds of

Georgian immigrants from Russia and threatened to freeze banking transactions with Georgia. Russia has also given political and economic backing to the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and, seeking to limit the presence of the OSCE and U.N., monitors the borders of the separated regions, condoning the local separatist militia and maintaining its "peacekeeping" forces.

Recently, Tbilisi has accused Russia of being behind an alleged 6 August air attack on Georgian territory near the South Ossetian conflict zone. Two separate groups of 13 technical experts from seven countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States) backed Tbilisi's version of events at the OSCE Forum for Security Cooperation (FSC) saying that at least one aircraft had intruded into Georgian airspace from Russia and dropped a guided anti-radar missile deep into Georgian territory.<sup>2</sup>

Though Russia has categorically denied any involvement in the incident, Georgian public opinion has presented the attack as a sequel to a controversial March 2007 missile strike on the Upper Kodori Gorge, in breakaway Abkhazia which houses the pro-Georgian Abkhaz government-in-exile. Georgia's media claimed Russia was seeking to warn the West that it maintained dominance over its neighbor and the particular target was not significant. Meanwhile, Senior Russian officials and diplomats, as well as Russia's Foreign Ministry, indicated several times this year that Moscow wanted to see Georgia as "a sovereign, neutral and friendly country." Russia's calls for Georgian neutrality collide with Tbilisi's NATO ambitions. The Georgian authorities have repeatedly said that the country's Euro-Atlantic aspiration is the top foreign policy priority and it cannot be traded off.

In the context of Georgian-Russian relations perhaps most sensitive of all is the question of Russian bases in Georgia. The presence of Russian troops has become one of the major hang-ups in the countries' bilateral relations, since Russia

<sup>1</sup> See: V.V. Naumkin, "Russian Policy in the South Caucasus," *The Quarterly Journal*, No. 3, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> See: "Missile Incident Discussed at OSCE," *Civil Ge*, 17 October, 2007.

agreed to the pullout of its bases under the provisions set forth in the 1999 OSCE Istanbul summit treaty.

Russian military presence in conflict zones is still a major challenge in the country, since

Russia retains a far more powerful presence in Georgia than any other foreign state, none of which, aware of the limitations of their own ability to project power, have sought to challenge its position.

## The Vaziani and Gudauta Military Bases

The withdrawal of the military bases of the Russian Federation from the territory of Georgia represented a firm determination of the citizens of Georgia and Georgian authorities.<sup>3</sup> On the basis of the joint statement made at the OSCE Istanbul Summit on 17 November, 1999, which is a part of the adapted CFE Treaty, the Georgian authorities have been holding negotiations with the Russian Federation on withdrawal of Russian military bases from the territory of Georgia. In accordance with the Istanbul joint statement, the Russian Federation committed itself to liquidate the Vaziani and Gudauta military bases. However, only on 6 October, 2006 the Russian Duma ratified agreements on the transit of Russian military cargo and personnel through Georgia, which included the terms, order of operation and withdrawal of Russian military bases from Georgia. The agreements were ratified in line with documents signed by Russia and Georgia in March 2006 in Sochi.

The term of the agreement is five years, but it may be extended if there are no objections from either side. Under the agreement, Russia must withdraw from the southern city of Akhalkalaki by October 1, 2007, but the deadline can be extended until December in the event of complications. The withdrawal from Batumi in the west of Georgia must be completed by late 2008. At the same time, the ratified agreement states that bases in Batumi and the southern city of Akhalkalaki will remain operational during the gradual process of removing troops and hardware. According to an agreement, the Russian military transit through Georgia may be conducted by road, air or rail transport. Russia cannot deliver through Georgian territory, including its air space, nuclear, chemical or biological weapons, as well as other weapons of mass destruction, including its components. Russia pledges not to deploy any further equipment or ammunition to the two bases.

The agreement defines transit procedures through Georgian territory of military cargo and personnel in support of the 102nd Russian military base in Armenia. The 102nd Russian military base in Gumri, about 120 kilometers from the Armenian capital Erevan, is part of a joint air defense system of the Commonwealth of Independent States, which was deployed in Armenia in 1995. The base operates under the authority of the Russian group of forces in the Southern Caucasus, and is equipped with S-300 (SA-10 Grumble) air defense systems, MiG-29 Fulcrum fighters and 5,000 personnel.<sup>4</sup>

An agreement also includes setting in motion preparations for a formal inspection by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and Germany of the Gudauta military base that Russia claims to have vacated in July 2001. Also agreed to seek additional sources of funding to cover the expenses of transporting equipment from the two Georgian bases. With regard to the liquidation of the Gudauta and Vaziani military bases, Russia has fulfilled the international commitment taken with-

<sup>3</sup> See: *Resolution of the Parliament of Georgia on the Military Bases of the Russian Federation Located on the Territory of Georgia*, 10 March, 2005, available at [<http://www.georgiaemb.org/DisplayMedia.asp?id=379>].

<sup>4</sup> See: "Duma Ratifies Agreements on Russian Military Presence in Georgia," *RIA Novosti*, 6 October, 2006.

in the Istanbul joint statement only partially. Namely, the Vaziani military base has been liquidated, however, only weaponry and military machinery restricted by the CFE Treaty have been removed from the Gudauta base, which the Georgian side is contesting.

## Akhalkalaki Military Base

Akhalkalaki's position on the Turkish border, and on a natural route from Turkey into the Southern Caucasus, has long made the area a strategic prize. In Soviet times, the base in Akhalkalaki was the headquarters of a powerful group of forces which confronted those of NATO's Turkey a few miles away across the border. Russian military representation in Samtskhe-Javakheti originates since 1828 when the Russian Empire conquered Samtskhe-Javakheti by military force and annexed it to the Tbilisi province.<sup>5</sup> Since that time till present the bases have had the most important influence on the political and economic situation in the region. It also called forth the formation of the present face of the region.

Both for the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union the existence of the base was of a great importance resulting from the military-strategic functions of the region. In the 19th century Samtskhe-Javakheti was an outpost of the Russian Empire in its fight against the Ottoman Empire, while after World War II it turned into a border region between two participants of the cold war—the Soviet Union and NATO. This accounts for the special militarization of the region. The Russian army and special services were concentrated here, while the majority of the region's population was connected in one or another way to the military institutions. The entire region presented a border zone and entrance was allowed only with special passes. This was also another factor for the isolation of the region's population from the rest of Georgia.

After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the issue of the withdrawal of the Russian military bases, including the Akhalkalaki base, became a matter of principle for the Georgian government and it presented the main issue of the Russian-Georgian relations. For the government of Georgia and the majority of population the presence of the military base is a remnant of the Russian rule and one of the linchpins of the unwanted Russian influence over Georgia. The key date for the base withdrawal became the OSCE Istanbul summit of 1999 when the Georgian and Russian sides came to the agreement, according to which a concrete date of army withdrawal should have been defined by 2000. However, a real step toward the solving of this issue was taken only in May 2005, when the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Russia and Georgia, Mr. Sergey Lavrov and Ms. Salome Zurabishvili adopted a joint declaration where the year 2008 was defined as the date for the base withdrawal. This declaration was supported by the agreement between the Ministries of Defense of Georgia and Russia signed on 31 March, 2006.

According to the above-mentioned agreement, the Russian troops shall leave Batumi and Tbilisi central base by 2008, while they should leave Akhalkalaki not later than 31 December, 2007. However, first military columns have already left their place of dislocation in Akhalkalaki in late 2004 on an ad-hoc basis and continued from mid-2006 onward in accordance with an agreed timetable. As a result on 27 June, 2007 Russia formally handed over its military base in Akhalkalaki to Tbilisi. It should be noted that the last 150 Russian troops left on the eve of the official handover. Thus Russians have completed withdrawal three months ahead of the December 2007 deadline. Fixed assets handed over

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<sup>5</sup> After annexation of different Georgian kingdoms and provinces Georgia was divided into two big provinces (gubernias)—Tbilisi Province in the East and Kutaisi Province in the West attached to the Russian Empire.

to the Georgians include 196 buildings on an area of 128 hectares as well as a nearby combat training range.<sup>6</sup>

The withdrawal of the Akhalkalaki base was perceived very painfully by the local Armenian population of Javakheti, which has two reasons to it—an economic and a political. Besides the pure military function, the base also had a social role, being the largest economic entity in Akhalkalaki. According to different sources 1,000-1,500 local residents were employed there and were relatively well paid. Moreover, Russian servicemen spent part of their income locally and the base was involved in different economic transactions. The base also ensured that the region stayed economically tied to Russia by paying local servicemen at the base in Russian rubles. As a result the main currency circulated in the region was ruble. Also, as a result of the 1998 Russian requirement that all servicemen at its bases hold Russian citizenship, the local Armenian population has acquired Russian citizenship in addition to their Georgian citizenship. The Russian military base was used for transporting unregistered goods in and out of the region, which increased the economic importance of the base not only for the local clans,<sup>7</sup> who were closely connected with the base authority, but for the local population as well.

The political motive is no less important. Fear of the neighboring Turkey is still very strong in the local Armenian population, as the conflicts that took place in the early 20th century are still vivid in their memory. The Armenian community in Javakheti strongly believes that only Russia can protect them from the imagined Turkish aggression. They argue that once Russian border guards left the Georgian-Turkish border the quality of frontier security sharply declined. The belief is widespread that if the Russian military base is withdrawn it will be replaced by NATO troops or the military forces of Georgia which is not trusted by the population either.

Today the Georgian government conducts programs for the integration of the Armenian-speaking population of Javakheti into the Georgian state. The withdrawal of the Russian bases from the region will not only strengthen the national sovereignty for the Georgian government, but also precondition the economic integration of the Javakheti population. To replace the bases, the government presents to the population various programs which will provide the unemployed population after the withdrawal of the bases with alternative jobs. One of such incentives was presented by the Ministry of Defense of Georgia according to which the mentioned body will permanently buy different agricultural products, basically potatoes, from the population for the military. Besides, there are special plans according to which centers of food production will be opened in Akhalkalaki providing new working places.

However, notwithstanding these promises the attitude of the population is still skeptic and acts of protest are conducted in the region. This proves that the process of the Russian military base withdrawal will not be painless and the Georgian government will face serious problems of social integration of unemployed workers.

## Batumi Military Base

From 1991 through 2005, Russia stonewalled the negotiations on troop withdrawal, attempting to prolong its presence at Akhalkalaki and Batumi indefinitely. Even after the signing of the 1999

<sup>6</sup> See: V. Soccor, "Georgian Flag Raised over Akhalkalaki," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 2 July, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Weakness of the civil sector in the region contributed to the emergence of local clan networks, who obtained control over existing resources and started to perform informal political, social and economic functions.



Istanbul agreements on troop withdrawal, Russia wanted at least another decade to close these two bases and demanded hundreds of millions of dollars as compensation for relocating the troops and materiel in Russia. However, the 2003 regime change in Georgia and the reestablishment of effective Georgian sovereignty in Ajaria changed the negotiations fundamentally. Moscow understood that the location of Batumi, deep inside Georgian territory, meant that the bases could be isolated and even blockaded if Russia refused to honor its obligation to close them down. This realization, as well as the loss of real military value of these bases, led Moscow to agree to evacuate them.

Instead, Russia hoped to retain the Batumi base by re-labeling it “anti-terrorist center.” The Georgian government originally came up with this idea in 2004 in order to re-start the Russian-blocked negotiations and to provide Moscow with a face-saving way to withdraw the troops. Tbilisi had envisaged the formation of one joint Georgian-Russian analytical anti-terrorist center, under Georgian sovereign control and not located at any existing military base, to be created in the wake of the garrisons’ departure, and to include several scores of Russian officers, without troops or armaments. The accord also contained vague language concerning the creation of such a center to be “formalized by a separate document,” as well as a bilateral commitment to conclude a pact regulating joint border issues “as soon as possible.”

The Russian leaders who seemed to be laying the groundwork for public acceptance of a withdrawal accord downplayed the strategic significance of the bases. “They are not bases, but just places where Soviet soldiers were always located. These bases are not of interest for us in terms of Russia’s security issues—this is the opinion of the Russian General Staff,” Russian President Vladimir Putin, stated in a meeting with the editorial staff of the *Komsomolskaia pravda* newspaper on 23 May, 2006.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time some observers and politicians in Georgia worried that the accord contained loopholes potentially enabling Russia to maintain a military presence in Georgia and thus public opinion felt uneasy about the project. Given the strained relations between the two countries, it seemed that neither Georgia nor Russia even theoretically considered the establishment of such a center in Batumi or elsewhere. However, in a statement issued on 21 November, 2007 Russia said that Georgia was failing to honor a commitment to start talks on the establishment of a joint anti-terrorist center to be based in the former Russian military base in Batumi. The Russian Foreign Ministry said that while Moscow had fulfilled its commitments under the agreement, Georgia was maintaining a non-cooperative stance.<sup>9</sup>

As to the 12th base most disturbing fact during the past years was that, despite the repeated ban imposed by the Georgian side, military exercises were carried out on the military polygons that were temporarily at the disposal of Russia. Moreover, the military units, stationed at the Batumi base, carried out military drills, using heavy weaponry and machinery on the Gonio military polygon and therefore, taking into account the fact that this region represented zone of tourist industry, inflicted particularly huge damage to Georgia’s ecosystem and economy. In addition, the Group of Russian Troops in the Transcaucasus (GRVZ) fully ignored the Georgian legislation and failed to adequately respond to the good will demonstrated by the Georgian side; sadly, the Russian leadership opted for an unconstructive position on this issue over the past years.

Recently on 13 November, the evacuation process from the 12th Russian military base in Batumi has ended and as a result it was officially handed over to Georgia ahead of planned schedule. A document on handing over of the base was signed by Batu Kutelia, the first deputy defense minister of Georgia and commander of the Group of Russian Forces in the Transcaucasus Andrei Popov. “All those facilities, which were occupied by the Russian military units, were transferred to the Georgian

<sup>8</sup> See: *Komsomolskaia pravda*, 23 May, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> See: “Moscow Tells Tbilisi to Keep Pledge on Anti-Terrorist Center,” *Civil Ge*, 21 November, 2007.

armed forces, while their remaining equipment, servicemen and staff are in the process of departure and the process will end in next several days,” Batu Kutelia told the Georgian Public Broadcaster. Confirming this fact Russian news agency RIA Novosti stated that “Russia has completed a pullout of military personnel and equipment from a Soviet-era base in Batumi, the Batumi base commander, the commander of Russia’s contingent in the Southern Caucasus, as well as 150 servicemen and their families are on the train, which is also carrying some 200 metric tons of equipment.”<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that originally the process was planned to be completed in a course of 2008, according to the agreement reached between Georgia and Russia in 2005.

The Batumi pullout means that no Russian troops remain in Georgia except for peacekeepers in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Georgian government gave a positive assessment of completion of withdrawal of the Russian 12th military base in Batumi and expressed hope that soon no Russian troops will be left in the conflict zones in the country’s territory. “This is a great victory of our country, our diplomacy, joint effort of all our institutions. I hope that, with the same pace, we shall manage to withdraw all the rest Russian troops from the country’s territory, including Abkhazia, that still cause major problems in the country. I hope that soon Russian troops will leave the whole Georgian territory,” Givi Targamadze, Chairman of the Georgian Parliamentary Committee for Defense and Security, said.<sup>11</sup>

The Georgian government officials recognize that Russia’s withdrawal will have a broad economic impact on the region and subsequently new roads, social welfare support and military food procurement contracts for local inhabitants have been promised. However, unanswered questions surrounded the work prospects for Georgians employed as military personnel at the Batumi base. The Georgian government announced that Georgian citizens employed as military personnel at the Russian bases would be eligible to transfer into the Georgian armed services. Officials hope a strategy to develop tourism in Ajaria could alleviate the economic damage done by the Russian troops’ departure. They think that main economic direction is privatization and concentration on tourism. However, some base workers are skeptical that tourism will enable them to make up for lost revenue following the withdrawal.

## CIS PKF and Gudauta base

Along with the Batumi and Akhalkalaki bases, the issue of the Russian military base in Gudauta, which is located in Georgia’s breakaway region of Abkhazia, also stirs debate. The base has always been a significant factor in the Abkhaz conflict. The Georgian side and many Western independent observers claim the Gudauta base provided principal military support to Abkhaz rebels during the war in 1992-1993. At a summit of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, in Istanbul in 1999, Russia agreed to shut down its base at Gudauta and to withdraw troops and equipment. Russia pledges that pursuant to the provisions of the OSCE Istanbul treaty, military equipment has been completely removed from the base and now the facility is used by the Russian peacekeepers, deployed in the Abkhaz conflict zone under the auspices of the Commonwealth of Independent States. However, the Georgian authorities doubt this statement and urge for international monitoring of the military base, with participation of Georgian experts.

<sup>10</sup> “Midnight Train from Georgia Sees Russia Complete Military Pullout,” *RIA Novosti*, 15 November, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> See: “Georgian MP Hopes that Russian Troops will Leave the Whole Georgian Territory Soon,” available at [<http://www.regnum.ru/english/914125.html>], 29 February, 2008.

Despite the fact that the Russian side declares the Gudauta military base closed, Apsnypress quoted Maj.-Gen. Sergey Chaban, commander of the Russian peacekeeping forces deployed in the Abkhaz conflict zone, that currently only 4 helicopters and 130 Russian military servicemen still remain there.<sup>12</sup> This means that the base is not closed and that position had been maintained repeatedly by the Georgian side at the Joint Consultation Group (JCG) meeting in Vienna and shared by the majority of OSCE member states. Russia retains the Gudauta base and is blocking OSCE inspections there, although such inspections are mandatory under the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe. Russia argues that the Georgian side must ensure safety of the international monitoring mission. The both sides know that Tbilisi cannot undertake such responsibility on the territory, which is not under its control, thus officials in Tbilisi believe that Russia uses this circumstance to delay the process as long as possible.

Meanwhile, Tbilisi seeks to end Russian Peacekeepers mandate in Abkhazia. Georgia says it will move to formally ask Russian peacekeepers to leave the breakaway region of Abkhazia following reports that they seized and beat five Georgian police officers. Government officials maintain that the 30 October, 2007 clash, in which several Georgian policemen were allegedly beaten and detained by Russian peacekeepers, has made imperative the demand for a new peacekeeping format. In a 31 October statement, the Georgian Foreign Ministry alleges that Russian peacekeepers with armored vehicles besieged a youth camp in Gannukhuri, a village in the Georgian region of Samegrelo, and physically abused and detained Georgian officers who were guarding the camp. The Georgian Interior Ministry special unit officers stopped the Russian peacekeepers, the Foreign Ministry claims, alleging that the confrontation ended only when Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili arrived on the scene. Commenting on Georgia's demand to dismiss the current peacekeeping forces commander, Sergey Chaban, from his post, A. Burutin said his powers were established by the Council of CIS Heads of State. Such issues should be decided by the CIS councils of defense and foreign ministers, he said.

At the same time, Georgian politicians have warned Russia against formally recognizing the independence of the Abkhazia, after Tbilisi issued claims that Moscow has stepped up its military presence in the conflict zone. Georgian State Minister for Conflict Resolution, Davit Bakradze, declared on 12 November that Russia has deployed five tanks, five rocket launchers, five military vehicles and seven howitzers, along with at least 200 additional troops, in the conflict zone. Moreover, President Saakashvili said on 14 November that the Georgian side had "documented evidence" proving of presence of additional Russian armament and troops in Ochamchira, breakaway Abkhazia.<sup>13</sup> The recognition of Abkhazia by Russia would amount to declaration of war against Georgia and "we will accept this challenge," an influential lawmaker Givi Targamadze, who chairs the Georgian parliament's defense and security committee, said on 13 November. Commenting on this, Matthew Bryza, the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, said that his government had already raised these reports with the Russian authorities. "That is something that would sharply contradict to Russia's status as facilitator," he added. He also condemned some statements "issued from other countries"—obviously referring to Russian officials (Yuri Luzhkov, the mayor of Moscow, has recently called for recognition of Abkhazia's independence)—calling for recognition of Abkhazia as "reckless, dangerous and unnecessary."

In response, the Russian Foreign Ministry in statement issued on 21 November, 2007 pointed out that although Russian troops have withdrawn from bases in Georgia, Russian servicemen remained as peacekeepers in the Abkhaz and South Ossetian conflict zones. According to the Russian Foreign Ministry, Russian peacekeepers represented "a major obstacle for those, who, under cover of peaceful

<sup>12</sup> See: "Abkhaz Reports: NATO Parliamentarians to Visit Abkhazia," *Civil Ge*, 20 April, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Georgian Public Broadcaster, 14 November, 2007.



rhetoric, continue preparing for military adventure in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.”<sup>14</sup> The Russian MoF also criticized what it said was official Tbilisi’s habit of raising spurious complaints against Russia. It said such a stance was designed to cover up Tbilisi’s unconstructive stance in the Russian-Georgian relations. At the same time, the Russian authorities dismissed earlier Georgian allegations that it was building a military base in Abkhazia.

### *C o n c l u s i o n*

The new Georgian state and its leaders have faced a number of objective obstacles, which suggests that the pullout of Russian troops from Georgia is inherently difficult, especially from conflict regions like Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These two unresolved territorial conflicts are small and frozen and are legacies of the demise of the Soviet Union and are considered as the most serious challenges facing Georgia today. It is clear that Georgia wants to solve the disputes in a democratic and European manner by ensuring political rights for both regions, individual rights, and the integrity of the Georgian state. Thus Georgia’s highest priority is to settle these conflicts peacefully and restore Georgia’s constitutional rule within its borders, using direct dialog with local populations, *de facto* leaders, and impartial mediation by the international community.

Though the Georgian government has pledged to establish “very good” relations with Russia, despite the fact that some political and military forces of Russia believe that the Georgian state-building project opposes Russia’s national interests, Russia is trying to restore its hegemony, and is actively, yet subtly, competing for influence over the region. Russia’s objectives toward Georgia focus on retaining influence as Russia has concerns about security on her southern border and the potential alliance of Turkey and the South Caucasian states. Accordingly, Russia feels threatened by the sudden move of NATO and other Western military structures into an area, which was very much part of its own backyard. In addition, Russia is not playing a helpful role and derails every attempt to find solutions for conflict settlement in Georgia. (Russia has illegally issued passports in the breakaway regions, while high-level Russian officials are serving in the *de facto* government of Abkhazia. The *de facto* leader of Abkhazia was also recently invited to a conference of Russian governors.) In this context, Russia’s geopolitical behavior in the region in the past several years has caused serious doubts that conflict resolution is a priority in Kremlin’s policy toward Georgia.

Generally, the situation with the Russian military bases in Georgia is now optimistically changing. Russia had almost fulfilled its 1999 OSCE Istanbul commitments to pull out military bases from Georgia, except for the need for Russia to reach agreement with Georgia on the status or withdrawal of the Russian presence at the Gudauta base. However, Russia’s decision to withdraw from a major treaty limiting military forces in Europe might affect the near-completed process of withdrawal of Russian bases from Georgia and especially from the Gudauta base. Russian officials stated that the suspension of its participation in the treaty meant Moscow would also stop providing information on and stop allowing inspections of its heavy weapons. It also said that Moscow would decide unilaterally on how many tanks or aircraft to deploy. Russia’s decision has raised much international concern.

Meanwhile, Tbilisi is unilaterally ending the mandate of Russian peacekeepers in Georgia. Although a specific date of removing Russian peacekeepers was not announced, the representatives of the State Chancellery stated that the date will be clear very soon. It seems that the Georgian government has finally decided to evict the Russian peacekeepers. Back in the Shevardnadze years, the par-

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<sup>14</sup> “Russia Dismisses Allegations It Is Building a Military Base in Abkhazia,” *RIA Novosti*, 11 June, 2007.

liament already stopped the mandate of Russian peacekeepers once, only to have Shevardnadze veto the measure. Many things changed after that and in 2006 the Georgian parliament returned to the issue of Russian peacekeepers, although still leaving the question of withdrawal date opened. However, this time the government decision looks like a final one and is not exposed to re-consideration.

At the same time, the Georgian parliament discusses the issue of who will replace Russian peacekeepers in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict zone. Most likely, these would be international peacekeeping forces, however, which countries will take part is not specified yet. How straightforward will the Georgian government be in this case depends on how events develop in Georgia and how Moscow will react. If Moscow does not stop aggravating the confrontation, then it is quite realistic to assume that the process of withdrawing Russian peacekeepers will take an unequivocal turn.

All of these developments demonstrate the seriousness of the situation in the Caucasus and create new challenges and options in the region. In many ways, Georgia's difficulties stem from Russia's confusion as to what its own priorities should be in the post-Soviet expanse. While Russian troop withdrawal clearly meets Georgia's interests, the procedures associated with the planned antiterrorist agreement and its legal implications pose some risks. The Georgian side would never agree to create such center, even under Georgian sovereignty. Georgia's desire for NATO membership is another factor influencing Tbilisi's withdrawal position. Some Georgian experts believe that Georgia's membership in NATO will not be seriously contemplated in Brussels until Russian troops leave the country.<sup>15</sup>

Notwithstanding all above-mentioned, Georgia needs to pursue a coherent approach to solve the current problems and advance democratic changes. In order to assist Georgia international community should be focused on several points:

- Georgia has managed to transform dramatically toward strengthening democracy in a very short period of time. Despite existing problems, country's course toward strengthening democracy and integration into NATO is very evident. Russia needs to recognize that a Western integrated Georgia would pose it no threat. To the contrary, a Western integrated Georgia would be a source of regional security and stability.
- Bringing Georgia into NATO would not be dangerous vis-à-vis Russia, rather, it would stabilize the relationship between Russia and Georgia, much as it did with the Baltic-Russian relationship. Moreover, it is necessary to convince Russia that Georgian progress and rapprochement with the West is irreversible.
- Moscow could do much more to normalize relations. Russia maintains the economic and transportation sanctions it imposed against Georgia. Likewise, it continues to take actions that call into question its professed support for Georgia's territorial integrity by supporting separatist regimes in Georgia's South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions. Russia should play a more constructive role and use its influence with the separatists to advance a peaceful resolution of each conflict in Georgia.
- Joint peacekeeping forces are operating under terms laid out in the Sochi Agreement but this framework may not be sufficient to build a lasting peace. Without substantial changes to the current peacekeeping framework, it is hard to imagine how the parties will arrive at a comprehensive solution. Many believe that the process now needs to be broadened.
- Due to the unconstructive stance of the Russian side, up to now it has been impossible to carry out inspection of the Gudauta base, which would verify its closure. At the same time, one-off

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<sup>15</sup> See: P. Ralchev, "Georgia's Russian Hurdles. Negotiating Russian Troops Withdrawal from Georgia," Institute for Regional and International Studies, 2005, available at [<http://www.iris-bg.org/f/plamen.pdf>].

inspection is not good enough to prove closure of the military base; it is essential to take specific measures aimed at guarantying permanent transparency in terms of further usage of certain facilities of the base.

- Although it remains to be seen whether Georgia will be able to bargain the best deal for itself, one thing is certain—Georgia's place in the region, and its relations with both Russia and the West, are entering a crucial new phase. Simply put, it's make it or break it time for Georgia.

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