

CRS Report for Congress

Russia-Georgia Conflict in South Ossetia: Context and Implications for U.S. Interests

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Summary

In the early 1990s, Georgia and its breakaway South Ossetia region had agreed to a Russian-mediated ceasefire agreement that provided for Russian “peacekeepers” to be stationed in the region. Moscow extended citizenship and passports to most ethnic Ossetians and supported the regional economy. Simmering long-time tensions erupted on the evening of August 7, 2008, when South Ossetia and Georgia accused each other of launching intense artillery barrages against each other. Georgia claims that South Ossetian forces did not respond to a ceasefire appeal but intensified their shelling, “forcing” Georgia to send troops into South Ossetia that reportedly soon controlled the capital, Tskhinvali, and other areas.

On August 8, Russia launched large-scale air attacks across Georgia and dispatched seasoned troops to South Ossetia that engaged Georgian forces in Tskhinvali later in the day. Reportedly, Russian troops had retaken Tskhinvali, occupied the bulk of South Ossetia, reached its border with the rest of Georgia, and were shelling areas across the border by the morning of August 10. Russian warplanes bombed the Georgian town of Gori and the outskirts of the capital, Tbilisi, as well as other sites. Russian ships landed troops in Georgia’s breakaway Abkhazia region and took up positions off Georgia’s Black Sea coast.

On August 12, Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev declared that “the aim of Russia’s operation for coercing the Georgian side to peace had been achieved and it had been decided to conclude the operation.... The aggressor has been punished.” Medvedev endorsed some elements of a European Union (EU) peace plan presented by visiting French President Nicolas Sarkozy. The plan calls for both sides to pull troops back, allow humanitarian aid into the conflict zone, and facilitate the return of displaced persons. After Russia and Georgia sign a binding text, the plan reportedly will be endorsed at a meeting of the U.N. Security Council. On August 13, the Russian military was reported to be pulling back from some areas of Georgia but also reportedly continued “mopping up” operations.

President Bush stated on August 9 that “Georgia is a sovereign nation, and its territorial integrity must be respected. We have urged an immediate halt to the violence [and] the end of the Russian bombings.” On August 13, he announced that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice would travel to France “to rally the free world in the defense of a free Georgia,” and to Georgia, where the United States was launching a major humanitarian aid effort. Congress had begun its August 2008 recess when the conflict began, but many members spoke out on the issue. Senators John McCain and Barack Obama condemned the Russian military incursion and urged NATO to soon extend a Membership Action Plan to Georgia. On August 12, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Joseph Biden warned Russia that its aggression in Georgia jeopardized Congressional support for legislation to collaborate with Russia on nuclear energy production and to repeal the Jackson-Vanik conditions on U.S. trade with Russia.

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Russia-Georgia Conflict in South Ossetia: Context and Implications for U.S. Interests

Background and Recent Developments

Tensions in Georgia date back at least to the 1920s, when South Ossetia made abortive attempts to declare its independence but ended up as an autonomous region within Soviet Georgia after the Red Army conquered Georgia. In 1989, South Ossetia lobbied for joining its territory with North Ossetia in Russia or for independence. Georgia's own declaration of independence from the former Soviet Union and subsequent repressive efforts by former Georgian President Gamsakhurdia triggered conflict in 1990. In January 1991, hostilities broke out between Georgia and South Ossetia, reportedly contributing to an estimated 2,000-4,000 deaths and the displacement of tens of thousands of people.

Figure 1. Map of South Ossetia



Source: Central Intelligence Agency via the University of Texas at Austin. Perry-Castaneda Library Map Collection. On the Internet: [http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/georgia_republic.html]

In June 1992, Russia brokered a cease-fire, and Russian, Georgian, and Ossetian “peacekeeping” units set up base camps in a security zone around Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia. The units usually totalled around 1,100 troops, including about 530 Russians, a 300-member North Ossetian brigade (which was actually composed of South Ossetians and headed by a North Ossetian), and about 300 Georgians. Monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) did most of the patrolling. A Joint Control Commission (JCC) composed of Russian, Georgian, and North and South Ossetian emissaries ostensibly promoted a settlement of the conflict, with the OSCE as facilitator. According to some

estimates, some 20,000 ethnic Georgians resided in one-third to one-half of the region and 25,000 ethnic Ossetians in the other portion. Many fled during the fighting in the early 1990s or migrated.

Some observers have argued that Russia's increasing influence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia over the years has transformed the separatist conflicts into essentially Russia-Georgia disputes. Most residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia reportedly have been granted Russian citizenship and passports and most appear to want their regions to be part of Russia.¹

In late 2003, Mikheil Saakashvili came to power during the so-called "rose revolution" (he was elected president in January 2004). He pledged to institute democratic and economic reforms, and to re-gain central government authority over the separatist regions. In 2004, he began to increase pressure on South Ossetia by tightening border controls and breaking up a large-scale smuggling operation in the region that allegedly involved Russian organized crime and corrupt Georgian officials. He also reportedly sent several hundred police, military, and intelligence personnel into South Ossetia. Georgia maintained that it was only bolstering its peacekeeping contingent up to the limit of 500 troops, as permitted by the cease-fire agreement. Georgian guerrilla forces also reportedly entered the region. Allegedly, Russian officials likewise assisted several hundred paramilitary elements from Abkhazia, Transnistria, and Russia to enter. Following inconclusive clashes, both sides by late 2004 ostensibly had pulled back most of the guerrillas and paramilitary forces.

In July 2005, President Saakashvili announced a new peace plan for South Ossetia that offered substantial autonomy and a three-stage settlement, consisting of demilitarization, economic rehabilitation, and a political settlement. South Ossetian "president" Eduard Kokoiti rejected the plan, asserting in October 2005 that "we [South Ossetians] are citizens of Russia."² The Georgian peace plan received backing by the OSCE Ministerial Council in early December 2005. Perhaps faced with this international support, in mid-December 2005, Kokoiti proffered a South Ossetian peace proposal that also envisaged benchmarks. The JCC in May 2006 agreed on economic reconstruction projects estimated to cost \$10 million, and the next month, the OSCE sponsored a donor's conference that raised these funds. A Steering Committee composed of the parties to the conflict and donors met in October 2006 to discuss project implementation. In February 2007, the pro-Georgian alternative leadership (see below) called for participating in projects. In April 2007, Kokoiti praised Russia's unilateral aid efforts and accused the Steering Committee of dallying (see also below).

¹ Vladimir Socor, *Eurasia Insight*, November 20, 2006.

² Open Source Center. *Central Eurasia: Daily Report* (hereafter *CEDR*), October 7, 2005, Doc. No. CEP-15001. *CEDR*, December 12, 2005, Doc. No. CEP-27204. South Ossetians who were citizens of Russia voted in the 2004 Russian presidential election, and a poster in South Ossetia afterward proclaimed that "Putin is our president." Many South Ossetians voted in the 2007 Russian Duma election and the 2008 Russian presidential election. *CEDR*, December 3, 2007, Doc. No. CEP-950289; February 28, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-4015.

In November 2006, a popular referendum was held in South Ossetia to reaffirm its “independence” from Georgia. The separatists reported that 95% of 55,000 registered voters turned out and that 99% approved the referendum. In a separate vote, 96% reelected Kokoit. The OSCE and U.S. State Department declined to recognize these votes. In “alternative” voting among ethnic Georgians in South Ossetia (and those displaced from South Ossetia) and other South Ossetians, the pro-Georgian Dmitriy Sanakoyev was elected governor of South Ossetia, and a referendum was approved supporting Georgia’s territorial integrity.

In March 2007, President Saakashvili proposed another peace plan for South Ossetia that involved creating “transitional” administrative districts throughout the region — ostensibly under Sanakoyev’s authority — which would be represented by an emissary at JCC or alternative peace talks. Each side accused the other in mid-2007 of blockading water supplies in South Ossetia and other “provocations,” including failure to hold JCC meetings. In July 2007, President Saakashvili decreed the establishment of a commission to work out South Ossetia’s “status” as a part of Georgia. The JCC finally held a meeting (with Georgia’s emissaries in attendance) in Tbilisi, Georgia, in October 2007, but the Russian Foreign Ministry claimed that the Georgian emissaries made unacceptable demands in order to deliberately sabotage the results of the meeting.³ No further meetings have been held.

During the latter half of July 2008, Russia conducted a military exercise that proved to be a rehearsal for Russian actions in Georgia a few weeks later. Code-named Caucasus 2008, the exercise involved more than 8,000 troops and was conducted near Russia’s border with Georgia. One scenario was a hypothetical attack by unnamed (but undoubtedly Georgian) forces on Georgia’s breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russian forces practiced a counterattack by land, sea, and air to buttress Russia’s “peacekeepers” stationed in the regions, protect “Russian citizens,” and offer humanitarian aid. The Georgian Foreign Ministry protested that the scenario constituted a threat of invasion. Simultaneously with the Russian military exercise, about 1,000 U.S. troops, 600 Georgian troops, and token forces from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine conducted an exercise in Georgia, code-named Immediate Response 2008, aimed at increasing troop interoperability for NATO operations and coalition actions in Iraq. Most if not all of these troops had left Georgia by the time of the outbreak of conflict.⁴

Renewed Conflict in South Ossetia

Tensions escalated in South Ossetia on July 3, 2008, when an Ossetian village police chief was killed by a bomb and the head of the pro-Georgian “government”

³ CEDR, November 1, 2007, Doc. No. CEP-950449.

⁴ CEDR, July 18, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-548001; July 28, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-358017; Georgia National Guard, “‘Immediate Response’ Underway in Republic of Georgia,” *Army.Mil News*, July 15, 2008; Capt. Bryan Woods, “Security Cooperation Exercise Immediate Response 2008 Begins with Official Ceremony in Republic of Georgia,” *Army.Mil News*, July 17, 2008.

in South Ossetia, Dmitriy Sanakoyev, escaped injury by a roadside mine. That night, both the Georgians and South Ossetians launched artillery attacks on each other's villages and checkpoints, reportedly resulting in about a dozen killed or wounded. The European Union, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe issued urgent calls for both sides to show restraint and to resume peace talks.

On July 8, 2008, four Russian military planes flew over South Ossetian airspace. The Russian Foreign Ministry claimed that the incursion had helped discourage Georgia from launching an imminent attack on South Ossetia. The Georgian government denounced the incursion as violating its territorial integrity, and on July 11 recalled its ambassador to Russia for "consultations." The U.N. Security Council discussed the overflights at a closed meeting on July 21, 2008. Although no decision was reached, Georgian diplomats reportedly stated that the session was successful, while Russian envoy Vitaliy Churkin denounced the "pro-Georgian bias" of some Security Council members.⁵

The day after the Russian aerial incursion, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice arrived in Georgia for two days of discussions on ways to defuse the rising tensions between Georgia and Russia. She stated that "some of the things the Russians did over the last couple of months added to tension in the region," called for Russia to respect Georgia's independence, and stressed the "strong commitment" of the United States to Georgia's territorial integrity.⁶

On July 25, 2008, a bomb blast in Tskhinvali, South Ossetia, killed one person. On July 30, both sides again exchanged artillery fire, with the South Ossetians allegedly shelling a Georgian-built road on a hill outside Tskhinvali, and the Georgians allegedly shelling two Ossetian villages. Two days later, five Georgian police were injured on this road by a bomb blast. This incident appeared to trigger serious fighting on August 2-4, which resulted in over two dozen killed and wounded. Kokoity threatened to attack Georgian cities and to call for paramilitary volunteers from the North Caucasus, and announced that women and children would be evacuated to North Ossetia. Georgia claimed that these paramilitary volunteers were already arriving in South Ossetia.

On the evening of August 7, 2008, South Ossetia accused Georgia of launching a "massive" artillery barrage against Tskhinvali that damaged much of the town, while Georgia reported intense bombing of some Georgian villages in the conflict zone. Saakashvili that evening announced a unilateral ceasefire and called for South Ossetia to follow suit. He also called for reopening peace talks and reiterated that Georgia would provide the region with maximum autonomy within Georgia as part of a peace settlement. Georgia claims that South Ossetian forces did not end their shelling of Georgian villages but intensified their actions, "forcing" Georgia to declare an end to its ceasefire and begin sending ground forces into South Ossetia. Georgian troops reportedly soon controlled much of South Ossetia, including Tskhinvali.

⁵ CEDR, July 22, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-950329; July 22, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-950042.

⁶ U.S. Department of State. Press Release. *Secretary's Remarks: Remarks En Route Prague, Czech Republic*, July 8, 2008.

Russian President Medvedev addressed an emergency session of the Russian Security Council on August 8. He denounced Georgia's incursion into South Ossetia, asserting that "women, children and the elderly are now dying in South Ossetia, and most of them are citizens of the Russian Federation." He stated that "we shall not allow our compatriots to be killed with impunity. Those who are responsible for that will be duly punished." He appeared to assert perpetual Russian control in stating that "historically Russia has been, and will continue to be, a guarantor of security for peoples of the Caucasus."⁷ On August 11, he reiterated this principle that Russia is the permanent guarantor of Caucasian security and that "we have never been just passive observers in this region and never will be."⁸

In response to the Georgian incursion into South Ossetia, Russia launched large-scale air attacks in the region and across Georgia. Russia quickly dispatched seasoned professional (serving under contract) troops to South Ossetia that engaged Georgian forces in Tskhinvali on August 8. Saakashvili responded by ordering that reservists be mobilized and declaring a 15-day "state of war." Reportedly, up to 6,000 Russian troops had retaken Tskhinvali, occupied the bulk of South Ossetia, reached its border with the rest of Georgia, and were shelling areas across the border by early in the morning on August 10 (Sunday). These troops were allegedly augmented by thousands of volunteer militiamen from the North Caucasus.⁹

On August 10, Georgian National Security Council Secretary Alexander Lomaia reported that Georgia had requested that Secretary Rice act as a mediator with Russia in the crisis over the breakaway region of South Ossetia, including by transmitting a diplomatic note that Georgia's armed forces had ceased fire and had withdrawn from nearly all of South Ossetia.¹⁰ Georgian Foreign Minister Eka Tkeshelashvili also phoned Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to report that all Georgian forces had been withdrawn from South Ossetia and to request a ceasefire, but Lavrov countered that Georgian forces remained in Tskhinvali.¹¹

Russian warplanes bombed the Kojori special forces battalion military base and a radar installation on Mt. Makhata in the suburbs of the Georgian capital Tbilisi early on August 11, according to Georgian Interior Ministry spokesman Shota Utiashvili. Russian warplanes also bombed residential areas in Gori. Georgian troops were pulled back to defend nearby Tbilisi from possible attack.

Actions in Abkhazia and Western Georgia. On August 10, the U.N. Assistant Secretary-General for Peacekeeping, Edmond Mulet, reported to the U.N. Security Council that the U.N. Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG; about 100

⁷ CEDR, August 8, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-950325.

⁸ CEDR, August 12, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-950226.

⁹ Anne Barnard, Andrew Kramer, C.J. Chivers and Ellen Barry, "Clashes in Georgia Move Another Step Closer to All-Out War: Russian Bombers Strike Capital's Airport," *The New York Times*, August 11, 2008; Dario Thuburn, "Russia's Ragtag Volunteers Enrol for Combat," *Agence France Presse*, August 10, 2008.

¹⁰ *Agence France Presse*, August 10, 2008.

¹¹ *Interfax*, August 10, 2008.

observers in all) had witnessed “ongoing aerial bombardments of Georgian villages in the Upper Kodori Valley” the previous day.¹² They also had observed “the movement by the Abkhaz side of substantial numbers of heavy weapons and military personnel towards the Kodori Valley.” Mulet also warned that Abkhaz separatist leader Sergei Bagapsh had threatened to push the Georgian armed forces out of the Upper Kodori Valley. In violation of their mandate, the Russian “peacekeepers” “did not attempt to stop such deployments” of Abkhaz rebel weaponry, Mulet reported. Fifteen UNOMIG observers were withdrawn from the Kodori Valley because the Abkhaz rebels announced that their safety could not be guaranteed, Mulet stated.¹³

Russian peacekeepers also permitted Abkhaz forces to deploy in the Gali region and along the Inguri River bordering Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia. Russian military and Abkhaz militia forces then moved across the river into the Zugdidi district, southwest of Abkhazia and indisputedly in Georgian territory (although some part is within the peacekeeping zone). Bombs fell on the town of Zugdidi on August 10. As the local population fled, Russian troops reportedly occupied the town and its police stations on August 11. Reportedly, the Russian military stated that it would not permit the Abkhaz forces to occupy the town of Zugdidi. The next day, the Russian military reported that it had disarmed Georgian police forces in the Kodori Valley and the Georgian police had pulled out.¹⁴

On August 10, Russia sent ships from the Black Sea Fleet to deliver troops to Abkhazia and take up positions along Georgia’s coastline. Russian military officials reported that up to 9,000 troops had been deployed by sea or air. Russian television reported that Igor Dygalo, Russian naval spokesman and aide to the Russian navy commander-in-chief, claimed that Russian ships had sunk a Georgian vessel in a short battle off the coast of Georgia.¹⁵ Georgian officials reported that the Russian ships were preventing ships from entering or leaving the port at Poti. The Russians reportedly also sank Georgia’s coast guard vessels at Poti. Three of the Russian warships reportedly left the area on August 13 and returned to their Black Sea base in the Crimea.

Russian troops occupied a Georgian military base in the town of Senaki, near Poti, on August 11, and reportedly destroyed it before pulling out. Russia claimed that the operation was to prevent Georgia from using the base to support its troops on the other side of the country in South Ossetia.

Russia Announces a Ceasefire. On August 12, the Russian government announced at mid-day that Medvedev had called Javier Solana, the European Union’s

¹² In July 2006, a warlord in the Kodori Valley area of northern Abkhazia, where many ethnic Svans reside, foreswore his nominal allegiance to the Georgian government. The Georgian government quickly sent forces to the area, defeated the warlord’s militia, and bolstered central authority.

¹³ “Security Council Holds Third Emergency Meeting as South Ossetia Conflict Intensifies, Expands to Other Parts of Georgia,” *States News Service*, August 10, 2008.

¹⁴ *CEDR*, August 10, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-950192 and Doc. No. CEP-950191.

¹⁵ *CEDR*, August 10, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-950216.

High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy to report that “the aim of Russia’s operation for coercing the Georgian side to peace had been achieved and it had been decided to conclude the operation.”¹⁶ In a subsequent meeting with Defence Minister Anatoly Serdyukov and chief of Armed Forces General Staff Nikolai Makarov, Medvedev stated that “based on your report I have ordered an end to the operations to oblige Georgia to restore peace.... The security of our peacekeeping brigade and civilian population has been restored. The aggressor has been punished and suffered very heavy losses.” He announced that military awards would be given to the troops. Seemingly in contradiction to his order for a halt in operations, he also ordered his generals to continue “mopping up” actions.¹⁷

Later that day, Medvedev met with visiting French President Sarkozy, who presented a ceasefire plan on behalf of the EU. President Medvedev reportedly backed some elements of the plan. French Foreign Minister Koucher then flew to Tbilisi to present the proposals to the Georgian government. Medvedev and Saakashvili consulted by phone the night of August 12-13 and they reportedly agreed to a six-point draft peace plan, according to a press conference by Sarkozy. The draft calls for both sides to cease hostilities and pull troops back to positions they had occupied before the conflict began. Other elements of the draft peace plan include allowing humanitarian aid into the conflict zone and facilitating the return of displaced persons. Sarkozy offered to send EU monitors to the conflict zone, a proposal endorsed by Saakashvili. The possibility of such monitors as well as an international format for follow-on peace talks is suggested by draft language calling for “the opening of international discussions on the modalities of security and stability in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.”¹⁸ An emergency meeting of EU foreign ministers on August 13 endorsed the peace plan and the possible participation of EU monitors (also see below, *International Response*). After Russia and Georgia sign a binding text, the plan reportedly will be endorsed at a meeting of the U.N. Security Council.

On August 13, the Russian military was reported to be pulling back from some areas of Georgia but also reportedly continued “mopping up” operations after the putative ceasefire, although major offensive actions may have ended. These “mopping up” operations may indicate a strategy of degrading Georgia’s remaining military assets and occupying extensive “buffer zones” of Georgian territory near the borders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This latter strategy appears somewhat like that taken by Armenia during the early 1990s conflict over Azerbaijan’s breakaway Nagorno Karabakh region. Lomaia alleged on August 13 that Russian troops and paramilitary forces were looting Gori, similar to what often took place during Russian operations in its breakaway Chechnya region early in the decade.

¹⁶ *ITAR-TASS*, August 12, 2008.

¹⁷ *CEDR*, August 12, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-950208.

¹⁸ *EDR*, August 13, 2008, Doc. No. EUP-950018.

Implications for Georgia and Russia

According to some observers, the recent Russia-Georgia conflict harms both countries. In the case of Georgia and South Ossetia, the fighting reportedly has resulted in hundreds of military and civilian casualties and large-scale infrastructure damage that may well set back economic growth and contribute to urgent humanitarian needs. Tens of thousands of displaced persons also add to humanitarian concerns. The fighting appears to have hardened anti-Georgian attitudes in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia, making the possibility of re-integration with Georgia more remote. Georgia also may face more difficulty in persuading some NATO members that it is ready for a Membership Action Plan (MAP), usually considered as a prelude to membership. In the case of Russia, its seemingly disproportionate military campaign appears to have harmed its image as a reliable and peaceable member of the international community.

President Medvedev's vow on August 8 to "punish" Georgia denoted Russian intentions beyond restoring control over South Ossetia. When he announced on August 12 that Russian troops were ending their offensive against Georgia, he stated that Russia's aims had been accomplished and the aggressor punished. Various observers have suggested several possible Russian reasons for the "punishment" beyond inflicting casualties and damage. These include coercing Georgia to accept Russian conditions on the status of the separatist regions, to relinquish its aspirations to join NATO,¹⁹ and to reverse democratization.²⁰ In addition, Russia may have wanted to "punish" the West for recognizing Kosovo's independence, for seeking to integrate Soviet successor states (which are viewed by Russia as part of its sphere of influence) into Western institutions such as the EU and NATO, and for developing oil and gas pipeline routes that bypass Russia.

Putin left the Beijing Olympics early and flew to Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia. State-controlled media showed Putin meeting with military officers and seemingly in charge of military operations. Later government-issued reports and telecasts of meetings between Medvedev and Putin during the crisis appeared to show Putin as the dominant authority. One Russian commentator assessed the meeting as showing that Medvedev would follow Putin's hard line in foreign policy instead of his own more liberal proclivities.²¹ Another Russian commentator raised concerns that the hard line followed by Putin and Medvedev strengthened the influence of the so-called *siloviki* — the representatives and veterans of the military, security, and police agencies — over foreign and defense policy.²²

Casualties and Displaced Persons. Claims of dead and injured were impossible to verify independently, since both Russia and Georgia limited media access in South Ossetia. Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin reported on August 11 that more than 2,000 people had been killed in South Ossetia, most of

¹⁹ "Russia 'Punishing' Georgia for NATO Aspirations," *RFE/RL*, August 10, 2008.

²⁰ Robert Kagan, "Putin Makes His Move," *Washington Post*, August 11, 2008.

²¹ Open Source Center. *OSC Analysis*, August 11, 2008, Doc. No. FEA-749753.

²² *CEDR*, August 11, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-25028.

them Russian citizens. Russian military sources reported that four of its warplanes had been shot down, 13 soldiers killed, and 70 wounded. Saakashvili claimed on August 10 that Russia had killed more than 300 civilians in bombing attacks around Georgia.

According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), up to 100,000 persons were displaced by the fighting, including 56,000 living in Gori (the bulk of the city's population). There are reports that 30,000 South Ossetians living in Tskhinvali were displaced, with most fleeing to North Ossetia, and that 12,000 Georgians fled from southern South Ossetia to other parts of Georgia.²³

Some observers in Soviet successor states voiced concerns that Russia's actions in Georgia did not bode well for their own sovereignty and independence. Russia's *Moscow Times* newspaper termed Russia's actions in Georgia "the strongest possible signal of how far [Russia] is ready to go to retain influence" in other Soviet successor states, and warned that these states are likely to "seek protection from the West," because of fears that they one day might be invaded.²⁴

U.S. Response

For years, the United States had urged Georgia to work within existing peace settlement frameworks for Abkhazia and South Ossetia — which allowed for Russian "peacekeeping" — while criticizing some Russian actions in the regions. This stance appeared to change during 2008, when the United States and other governments increasingly came to support Georgia's calls for the creation of alternative negotiating mechanisms to address these "frozen" conflicts, particularly since talks under existing formats had broken down.

This U.S. policy shift was spurred by increasing Russian actions that appeared to threaten Georgia's territorial integrity. Among these, the Russian government in March 2008 formally withdrew from economic sanctions on Abkhazia imposed by the Commonwealth of Independent States, permitting open Russian trade and investment.²⁵ Of greater concern, President Putin issued a directive in April 2008 to step up government-to-government ties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He also ordered stepped up consular services for the many "Russian citizens" in the two regions. He proclaimed that many documents issued by the separatist governments and businesses which had been established in the regions would be recognized as legitimate by the Russian government. Georgian officials and other observers raised concerns that this directive tightened and flaunted Russia's jurisdiction over the regions and appeared to be moving toward official Russian recognition of their independence.

²³ Laurence Peter, "Civilian emergency hits Georgia," *BBC News*, August 12, 2008.

²⁴ *Moscow Times*, August 11, 2008.

²⁵ The economic sanctions had been approved by the Commonwealth of Independent States in January 1996 at Georgia's behest as an inducement to Abkhazia to engage in peace negotiations with Georgia.

A meeting of the U.N. Security Council (UNSC) on April 23, 2008, discussed these Russian moves. Although the Security Council issued no public decision, the United States, Great Britain, France, and Germany stated that same day that they “are highly concerned about the latest Russian initiative to establish official ties with ... Abkhazia and South Ossetia without the consent of the Government of Georgia. We call on the Russian Federation to revoke or not to implement its decision.”²⁶ The Russian foreign ministry claimed that Russia’s actions had been taken to boost the basic human rights of residents in the regions.

According to one U.S. media report, Bush Administration officials “were taken by surprise” by Georgia’s attempt to occupy South Ossetia in early August 2008, since the Administration had cautioned Georgia against actions that might result in a Russian military response. At the same time, a “senior U.S. official” on August 9 reportedly described the fighting in South Ossetia as localized and unlikely to escalate.²⁷

President Bush was at the Beijing Olympics when large-scale fighting began. Although he did not cut short his trip (unlike Putin), President Bush stated on August 9 in Beijing that “Georgia is a sovereign nation, and its territorial integrity must be respected. We have urged an immediate halt to the violence and a stand-down by all troops. We call for the end of the Russian bombings.” A similar statement was issued by Secretary Rice. On August 10, Deputy National Security Adviser James Jeffrey warned Russia of a “significant long-term impact” on US-Russian relations if Moscow continued “disproportionate actions” in Georgia and urged Russia to respond favorably to Georgia’s withdrawal of forces from South Ossetia.²⁸ Late on August 10, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Bryza flew to Tbilisi to assist with Koucher’s EU peace plan.

On August 10, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told Secretary Rice in a phone conversation that “given the continuing direct threat to the lives of Russian citizens in South Ossetia, Russian peacekeeping forces... are continuing operations to force peace on the Georgian side.” The U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., Zalmay Khalilzad, revealed that Lavrov had told Rice that Saakashvili “must go” as a condition for a ceasefire.²⁹

Vice President Cheney issued a statement on August 10 after a phone conversation with Saakashvili that “Russian aggression must not go unanswered,” and that the continuation of aggression “would have serious consequences for [Russia’s] relations with the United States, as well as the broader international

²⁶ “Germany, Great Britain, France, U.S.A. and Germany Passed Communique,” *Black Sea Press*, April 24, 2008.

²⁷ *Associated Press*, August 11, 2008; *Wall Street Journal*, August 11, 2008.

²⁸ The White House. *Press Briefing by Press Secretary Dana Perino and Senior Director for East Asian Affairs Dennis Wilder and Deputy National Security Advisor Ambassador Jim Jeffrey*, August 10, 2008.

²⁹ John Heilprin, “U.S., Russian Ambassadors Spar at UN over Georgia,” *Associated Press*, August 10, 2008.

community.”³⁰ Also appearing to take a stronger stance, President Bush on August 11 referred to his conversation with Putin on August 8, stating that he had told Putin that “this violence [in Georgia] is unacceptable,” and that he had “expressed my grave concern about the disproportionate response of Russia and that we strongly condemn bombing outside of South Ossetia.”³¹ On August 12, Secretary Rice stated that she was encouraged by reports from French Foreign Minister Koucher in Moscow that there was progress in talks with President Medvedev about the EU peace plan, and reiterated that the United States supports Georgia’s territorial integrity and “its democratically elected government.”³²

On August 10, the U.S. military began flying 2,000 Georgian troops home from Iraq after Georgia recalled them. A U.S. military spokesman stated that “we want to thank them for the great support they have given the coalition and we wish them well.” Another military spokesman stated that “we are supporting the Georgian military units that are in Iraq in their redeployment to Georgia so that they can support requirements there during the current security situation.”³³ On August 11, Putin criticized these U.S. flights as aiding Georgia in the conflict.

In a strong statement on August 13, President Bush called for Russia “to begin to repair the damage to its relations with the United States, Europe, and other nations, and to begin restoring its place in the world [by meeting] its commitment to cease all military activities in Georgia [and withdrawing] all Russian forces that entered Georgia in recent days.” He raised concerns that some Russian troops remained in the vicinity of Gori and Poti. He announced that he was sending Secretary Rice to France to “confer with President Sarkozy” on the EU peace plan and to Georgia, “where she will personally convey America’s unwavering support for Georgia’s democratic government [and] continue our efforts to rally the free world in the defense of a free Georgia.” He also announced that Defense Secretary Robert Gates would direct a humanitarian aid mission, which already had begun with an airlift of medical supplies to Tbilisi.³⁴

Georgia’s relations with Euro-Atlantic countries, particularly the United States, may be set back as a result of disappointment among some in Georgia that the West did not do more to defend it from Russia. Some Georgians complained that President Bush made no public offers of assistance during the height of the fighting. In Tbilisi, however, Deputy Assistant Secretary Bryza on August 12 reportedly stated that the United States was developing an aid package.

³⁰ Stephanie Gaskell, “Cheney Warns Russia: Veep Says Attack on Georgia ‘Must Not Go Unanswered’ as War Expands,” *Daily News* (New York), August 11, 2008.

³¹ The White House. Office of the Press Secretary. *President Bush Discusses Situation in Georgia*, August 11, 2008.

³² U.S. Department of State. Office of the Press Secretary. *Remarks by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Situation in Georgia*, August 12, 2008.

³³ Kim Gamel, “U.S. Military Begins Flying Georgian Troops Home,” *Associated Press*, August 10, 2008.

³⁴ The White House. Office of the Press Secretary. *President Bush Discusses Situation in Georgia, Urges Russia to Cease Military Operations*, August 13, 2008.

International Response

Myriad world leaders and organizations have rushed to mediate the Georgia-Russia conflict. Many governments have appeared to consider that both Russia and Georgia may share blame for the recent conflict, but that the most important concern at present is implementation of a ceasefire regime and urgent humanitarian relief. These governments have criticized Russia for excessive use of force and Georgia for attempting to reintegrate South Ossetia by force.³⁵

Immediately after the events of August 7-8, the U.N. Security Council (UNSC) met daily to attempt to agree on a resolution, but Russia and China refused to agree to various texts proffered by the United States, France, and Great Britain. The latter states reportedly were working on a resolution based on an EU peace plan (see below).³⁶ At the UNSC meeting on August 10, Russian Ambassador Vitaliy Churkin demanded that Georgia remove its troops, sign an agreement not to use force against Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and return to the status quo ante of early August as conditions for further talks. U.S. Ambassador Khalilzad denounced the “Russian attack on sovereign Georgia and targeting of civilians and a campaign of terror,” and warned that “Russia's relations with the United States and others would be affected by its continued assault on Georgia and its refusal to contribute to a peaceful conclusion of the crisis.” Churkin countered that it was “completely unacceptable” for Khalilzad to accuse Russia of a campaign of terror, “especially from the lips of a representative of a country whose action we are aware of in Iraq, Afghanistan and Serbia.”³⁷

On August 10, Lavrov claimed that Rice had “incorrectly interpreted” remarks he made to her in a phone conversation earlier about Saakashvili. Lavrov emphasized that Russia “cannot consider as a partner a person [referring to Saakashvili] who gave an order to carry out war crimes,” but he rejected the inference that Moscow was demanding Saakashvili’s ouster as a condition for ending military operations.³⁸

French President Nicolas Sarkozy — whose country had taken the rotating leadership of the EU in July 2008 — had extensive phone consultations on August 10 with Saakashvili, Medvedev, Bush, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and other European leaders to work out an EU peace proposal. Provisions included the immediate cessation of hostilities, the withdrawal of Russian and Georgian armed forces to their positions prior to the start of hostilities, full respect for the sovereignty

³⁵ Alexei Malashenko, quoted in *Moscow Times*, August 11, 2008.

³⁶ Some observers pointed out that Russia and China dismissed arguments that Georgia was dealing with its own internal affairs in South Ossetia, while Moscow and Beijing reject international “interference” in how they deal with separatist problems in Chechnya, Tibet, and Xinjiang.

³⁷ John Helprin, “Russia Says it Is Ready to Negotiate with Georgia,” *Associated Press*, August 10, 2008.

³⁸ *Agence France Presse*, August 10, 2008.

and territorial integrity of Georgia, and international assistance.³⁹ French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner flew to Georgia on August 10 to discuss this EU peace plan, arriving a few hours after Russian aircraft allegedly bombed near Tbilisi's international airport. He met with Saakashvili, who agreed to the EU peace plan, and then flew to Moscow to present the plan along with Sarkozy. After Medvedev and Sarkozy worked out elements of a plan, Kouchner flew back to Tbilisi to meet with Saakashvili. Saakashvili and Medvedev reportedly consulted further by phone and further agreed on ceasefire moves early on August 13.

The presidents of the three Baltic states and Poland called on August 9 for the EU and NATO to oppose the "imperialist policy" of Russia. The next day, Polish President Lech Kaczynski unveiled a plan worked out by the Baltic states, Poland, and Ukraine, for an international stabilization force for the South Caucasus, and recommended the plan to French President Nicolas Sarkozy for consideration by the EU. Commenting on the plan, Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski stated that an EU stabilization force was needed, since "it is no longer possible for Russian soldiers alone to assure the peace in South Ossetia." In apparent contrast to the Polish position, Italy's Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi warned against the EU adopting an "anti-Russian" stance regarding the Russia-Georgia conflict.⁴⁰ EU foreign ministers met in Brussels in emergency session on August 13. They emphasized support for the EU peace proposals, called for bolstering OSCE monitoring in South Ossetia, and suggested that EU or U.N. observers might be necessary.⁴¹

Some observers have suggested that sanctions the West might take against Russia might include no longer inviting Russia to participate in the Group of Eight (G-8) industrialized democracies, withdrawing support for Russia as the host of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, and re-examining Russia's suitability for membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO). U.S. analyst Ariel Cohen urged the West "to send a strong signal to Moscow that creating 19th century-style spheres of influence and redrawing the borders of the former Soviet Union is a danger to world peace."⁴² EU analyst Nicu Popescu has called for the EU to sanction Russia, including by suspending talks on a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement.⁴³

Several Western diplomats and analysts drew parallels between Russia's activities in Georgia and the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia (Yugoslavia), which was aimed at forcing Serb President Slobodan Milosevic to end Serbian attacks in the Kosovo region. Moscow opposed the NATO operation. According to former Greek

³⁹ *Agence France Presse*, August 10, 2008.

⁴⁰ *EDR*, August 11, 2008, Doc. No. EUP-58004 and Doc. No. EUP-100019; August 12, 2008, Doc. No. EUP-58002.

⁴¹ Council of the European Union. *Council Conclusions on the Situation in Georgia*, August 13, 2008.

⁴² Ariel Cohen, "The Russian-Georgian War: A Challenge for the U.S. and the World," *Heritage Foundation Web Memo*, August 11, 2008.

⁴³ *EUObserver*, August 13, 2008.

diplomat Alex Rondos, “Russia wants to serve up to the West a textbook copy of what the West did to Serbia, but of course it’s a ghastly parody.”⁴⁴ These observers criticize Russia’s disproportionate response in Georgia and stress that NATO’s military aircraft and artillery did not target civilians in Serbia, as Russian forces allegedly targeted ethnic Georgian villages in South Ossetia and across the border. They also stress that NATO halted operations after Serbia pulled its forces out of Kosovo and accepted international peacekeeping, while Russia continued operations after Georgia’s withdrawal of troops from South Ossetia and its calls for a ceasefire.

While some commentators objected to Georgia’s military incursion into South Ossetia as unjustifiable, others argued that Georgia had been provoked by Russia and South Ossetia and had been forced to counter-attack. Taking the former view, London’s *Independent* argued on August 10 that “U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice ... should, while defending Georgia's sovereignty, also point out to President Saakashvili that the US cannot underwrite a bellicose approach towards its separatist regions.”⁴⁵ Taking the latter view, British analyst David Clark argued on August 11 that Georgia’s “resort to offensive operations came at the end of a long period of rising tension in which Russia had done everything it could to stir up trouble and provoke a reaction.”⁴⁶ Similarly, U.S. analyst Robert Kagan argued that Russia “precipitated a war against Georgia by encouraging South Ossetian rebels,” and that Saakashvili “[fell] into Putin’s trap.”⁴⁷

Observers who took this view also tended to view Russia’s large-scale military operations against Georgia as disproportionate. Great Britain’s *The Guardian* argued on August 10 that Russia “lost no time in shedding whatever moral advantage it felt it had,” because of Georgia’s apparent attack on South Ossetia, “by bombing Georgian targets — civilian as well as military, — far removed from the zone of conflict.”⁴⁸

Taking a seemingly dimmer view of Russian intentions, U.S. analyst Ronald Asmus has stated that “despite everything we may have hoped for we are in a new geopolitical competition in the old Soviet spheres of influence. We may lose Georgia. We may lose the ... best chance for a democratic future in the Caucasus. The next target for Moscow will be Ukraine.”⁴⁹ One Italian commentator asserted that Russia’s actions in Georgia represented the beginning of Russia’s efforts to roll back the Euro-Atlantic integration of Eastern European and Soviet successor states.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ *Wall Street Journal*, August 11, 2008.

⁴⁵ It conditioned this by adding that “the Russians should not be allowed to get away with supporting breakaway regions within Georgia.”

⁴⁶ David Clark, *The Guardian*, August 11, 2008.

⁴⁷ Robert Kagan, “Putin Makes His Move,” *Washington Post*, August 11, 2008.

⁴⁸ “South Ossetia: Much Ventured, Little Gained,” *The Guardian*, August 11, 2008.

⁴⁹ Ronald Asmus, *Christian Science Monitor*, August 11, 2008; Ronald Asmus, “Black Sea Watershed,” *GMF News*, August 11, 2008.

⁵⁰ Open Source Center. *Europe: Daily Report* (hereafter *EDR*), August 12, 2008, Doc. No. (continued...)

Some observers have raised concerns that Russia's alleged attempts to bomb the Georgian sections of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the South Caucasus [gas] Pipeline (SCP) were Russian attempts to disrupt Caspian energy pipelines that it does not control. The BTC pipeline provides oil to Europe and the United States. The SCP provides gas to Turkey and to EU-member Greece, and may be further extended to other EU members. Azerbaijan's pledge to provide gas through a prospective Nabucco pipeline that would run through Georgia and Turkey to Europe also might face greater Russian opposition, as might the proposed trans-Caspian oil and gas pipelines, which would provide Central Asian countries with non-Russian export routes to the West.

International Humanitarian Assistance. Many countries and international organizations have launched humanitarian assistance efforts. Louis Michel, European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, announced a grant of one million euros (1.5 million dollars) for civilians affected by the conflict in South Ossetia. A plane loaded with humanitarian cargo planned to leave for Georgia on August 11. Russia has dispatched two convoys of humanitarian supplies to Tskhinvali, and UNHCR sent a first planeload of such aid to Tbilisi on August 12. The International Committee of the Red Cross has appealed for \$7.4 million for the emergency medical needs of displaced people.⁵¹

Georgia and the NATO Membership Action Plan. Some observers in Georgia and the West have argued that NATO's failure to offer Georgia a Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the April 2008 NATO summit emboldened Russia's aggressiveness toward Georgia. Others consider that NATO's pledge that Georgia eventually would become a member, as well as Georgia's ongoing movement toward integration with the West, spurred Russian aggression.⁵² Saakashvili argued on August 10 that Russia wanted to crush Georgia's independence and end its bid to join NATO. British analyst David Clark on August 11 endorsed the view that NATO should now quickly provide Georgia with a MAP.⁵³ Conversely, London's *Independent* on August 10 stated that "thinking hard" about giving NATO membership to countries with separatist conflicts had turned out to be a good policy, and suggested that the conflict is "a setback to Georgia's NATO ambitions."

France and Germany, which had voiced reservations at the April 2008 NATO summit about extending a MAP to Georgia, may argue even more forcefully against admitting Georgia, citing both the higher level of tensions over the separatist regions, Georgia's military incursion into South Ossetia, and the danger of war with Russia. Although the United States strongly supported a MAP for Georgia at the April 2008 NATO summit, recent events may have dimmed this prospect. A

⁵⁰ (...continued)
EUP-25002.

⁵¹ Laurence Peter, "Civilian emergency hits Georgia," *BBC News*, August 12, 2008.

⁵² For background, see CRS Report RL34415, *Enlargement Issues at NATO's Bucharest Summit*, by Paul Gallis, Paul Belkin, Carl Ek, Julie Kim, Jim Nichol, and Steven Woehrel.

⁵³ David Clark, *The Guardian*, August 11, 2008.

Slovakia commentator argued that “it is difficult to get around the impression that Georgian President Saakashvili took leave of his senses when he ordered his army to ‘liberate’ South Ossetia.... now there is danger that they have blocked their path to the Alliance for a long time, if not definitively. Moreover, the West will think twice whether it will become engaged on their side at all. This is precisely what Moscow wanted the most.”⁵⁴

An emergency meeting of NATO ambassadors on August 12, 2008 reiterated “in very strong terms” support for a sovereign, independent Georgia, and “condemned and deplored [Russia’s] excessive, disproportionate use of force,” according to a report by NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer. He termed Georgia “a highly respected partner of NATO,” and stated that the question of a MAP for Georgia remains “very much alive” and may be decided in December 2008. At the same time, there was evidence of hesitancy among some NATO members about moving forward with a MAP for Georgia at the December 2008 session.⁵⁵

Congressional Response. Congress has long been at the forefront in U.S. support for Georgia, including humanitarian, security, and democratization assistance as well as support for conflict resolution. Among recent actions, the Senate approved S.Res. 550 (Biden) on June 3, 2008, calling on Russia to disavow the establishment of direct government-to-government ties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Congress had begun its August 2008 recess when the Russia-Georgia conflict began, but many members spoke out on the issue. On August 8, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Howard Berman urged all parties to cease fighting and for Russia to withdraw its troops and respect Georgia’s territorial integrity.⁵⁶ Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Joseph Biden called for U.S. officials and the U.N. Security Council to facilitate negotiations between the conflicting parties and stated that “Moscow has a particular obligation to avoid further escalation of the situation.”⁵⁷ Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen stated that Russia’s invasion of Georgia caused little surprise, given Russia’s other increasingly aggressive foreign policy actions, and called for an international peacekeeping force for South Ossetia.⁵⁸ Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin on August 10 averred that the United States does “not have much impact, I believe, in terms of [Administration]

⁵⁴ EDR, August 10, 2008, Doc. No. EUP-59002.

⁵⁵ Robert Wielaard, NATO Extends Warm Support for Georgia,” *Associated Press*, August 12, 2008; “Georgia Still on Track to Join NATO, Alliance Chief Says,” *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, August 12, 2008. Russia’s NATO Ambassador Dmitry Rogozin denounced Scheffer’s comments and demanded that NATO colleagues condemn Saakashvili.

⁵⁶ “Statement by Congressman Howard Berman, Chairman of House Committee on Foreign Affairs, on Escalating Violence in South Ossetia,” *States News Service*, August 8, 2008.

⁵⁷ “Biden Issues Statement on Continued Violence in South Ossetia,” *States News Service*, August 8, 2008.

⁵⁸ “Ros-Lehtinen Comments on Outbreak of Violence in Georgia,” *States News Service*, August 8, 2008. She stated that Russian aggression against Georgia was “another reason for the Administration to withdraw the nuclear cooperation agreement from consideration by Congress.”

declarations anymore,” but should work with Europe to make clear to Russia that its action “is way out of line” and to convince it to halt aggression in Georgia.⁵⁹ On August 12, Senator Biden warned Russia that its aggression in Georgia jeopardized congressional support for legislation to collaborate with Russia on nuclear energy production and to repeal the Jackson-Vanik conditions on U.S. trade with Russia.⁶⁰

Senator John McCain, the Ranking Minority Member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, who had previously visited South Ossetia, condemned the Russian military incursion on August 8 and warned Russia that there could be severe, long-term negative consequences to its relations with the United States and Europe. He also stated on August 12 that he had phoned Saakashvili to offer support. Senator Barack Obama, Chairman of the Senate Europe Subcommittee, condemned the Russian military incursion into Georgia on August 8 and called for Georgia to refrain from using force in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and for all sides to pursue a political settlement that addresses the status of the regions. Both Senators McCain and Obama have urged NATO to soon extend a MAP to Georgia.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Ben Feller, “Bush Seeks to Contain Violent Conflict in Georgia,” *Associated Press*, August 10, 2008.

⁶⁰ “Op-Ed: Russia Must Stand Down,” *States News Service*, August 12, 2008.

⁶¹ Steven Hurst, “McCain: Today We're All Georgians,” *Associated Press Worldstream*, August 12, 2008; Steven Hurst, “Obama Notes Georgian Role in Crisis,” *Associated Press Worldstream*, August 12, 2008.