



PHOTO BY ALTHOONS



South Ossetian and Russian flags fly over the main checkpoint at the South Ossetia conflict line.

A More Proactive U.S. Approach to the Georgia Conflicts

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Introduction and summary¹

Georgia faces a stark choice between two mutually exclusive futures.

The first depicts Georgia as a modern-day divided Berlin and envisions the conflicts it currently faces as a Cold War in the Caucasus—a long-term and largely bloodless division between sides whom outside forces have divided so profoundly that compromise is ruled out *a priori*.² The conflicts are resolved when the other side surrenders, its own residents tear down the artificially imposed division, and its government implodes due to the weakening of its patron.

Such a scenario invokes the artificiality of Berlin's division, the perceived inevitability of communism's collapse, and the nobility of West Berliners as they constructed a thriving market democracy on the frontlines of the Cold War. It therefore strikes a chord with many in the West.

Unfortunately, an outcome like Berlin 1989 is highly unlikely for the Georgia conflicts even in the long term. Residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia—self-governing entities currently recognized as independent states by Russia and three other countries—would have to magically “get over” their grievances—some of which originate from conflicts fought with Georgians in the 1990s while others are a product of more recent hostilities. But they would also have to embrace the Georgian government as their own and renounce their longstanding ambitions for self-government. In other words, the divisions among peoples in Georgia are anything but artificial.

Further, Russia would have to suddenly and drastically reverse its policies, undo its decision to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, cut off its economic support, and withdraw its military presence. All paths to that outcome are far from inevitable: Russia's leadership being coerced into a radical policy shift or instantaneously realizing the error of its ways, a new leadership coming to power that is willing to do something deeply unpopular with the Russian public and elite, or Russia's collapsing like the Soviet Union.

Finally, Georgia would have to stand stoically on the frontlines awaiting its inevitable victory for Berlin 1989 to repeat itself in the Caucasus. But we have learned from the past two and a half years that there is nothing noble about the status quo: Neither the Georgian elite nor the public can simply focus on the country's development with the conflicts unresolved. Georgia as a barracks state is unlikely to develop its economy successfully or complete its democratic transformation, remaining indefinitely on the global periphery. It could also eventually face diplomatic scorn as its Western friends tire of Georgia's using all international settings to raise the conflicts and continuously being at loggerheads with Russia.

This first scenario—Georgia as divided Berlin—is thus a recipe for perpetual conflict. It will lead to Georgia's continued dismemberment; Abkhazia and South Ossetia's remaining as isolated, impoverished, and militarized Russian protectorates; and unending Georgia-Russia confrontation. In this scenario, Georgia's membership in Euro-Atlantic institutions will therefore remain an aspirational talking point.

The second scenario envisions a process of conflict transformation that reduces tensions, brings people together across the conflict lines, creates trust, builds trade links, and normalizes contacts among authorities. Through this process, the

Georgian army officers in civilian clothing raise their country's flag in the Senaki army base just after Russian troops, which controlled the area for more than ten days, left it in late August 2008.

Source: AP Photo



parties not only cease to antagonize each other, but they also come to a shared understanding of the way forward. Over the course of years or even decades such a process would result in a peaceful and just resolution of the conflicts within Georgia's internationally recognized borders: The full restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity,³ reconciliation among peoples, constitutional arrangements that guarantee self-government for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the withdrawal of foreign troops from Georgia that do not have the government's consent to be there, and a complete normalization of Russia-Georgia relations.

Under this scenario, Georgia also benefits from increased regional trade links and a likely massive bump in foreign investment due to its increased stability. Further, it could rapidly progress toward full membership in Euro-Atlantic structures, which have proven centrally important in successful transitions in post-Communist Europe.

The second scenario is clearly preferable for U.S. national interests for a number of reasons. First, the United States has made a commitment to resolving Georgia's conflicts within its internationally recognized borders. If it does not find ways to make further progress on that commitment it will face erosion of its credibility. Second, a divided Georgia is an unstable Georgia, with the potential to lead to new bouts of violent conflict and upheaval in this fragile region. Third, the status quo is the source of major tensions in the international system and prevents progress on other major U.S. goals. And fourth, since 1991 the United States has consistently held that its fundamental aim in the region is to facilitate the political and economic transformation of the post-Soviet states. A failure to resolve these conflicts would be an impediment to both Georgia's *and* Russia's transformations.

But the first scenario—Georgia as divided Berlin—is in fact the one implicitly privileged by much of the rhetoric that has come out of Washington since the August 2008 Russia-Georgia war. The Obama administration, following a policy pattern set in place more than a decade before, has yet to make conflict transformation a central priority of its approach to the region. Much effort is spent behind the scenes to convince the parties to avoid provocative behavior and peacefully work out their differences. This approach is incomplete and it needs to change.

The U.S. government has helped facilitate important steps forward since August 2008 despite the parties' ongoing mutual suspicions and often hostile rhetoric. Conditions today are more favorable than any time since the war for a more proactive U.S. approach to the Georgia conflicts to have an even greater impact. Indeed,

for a variety of reasons, early 2011 might represent a unique window of opportunity —not for resolving the conflicts but for short-term progress that could facilitate resolution in the long term. To take advantage of it, the Obama administration should begin by urging all sides to adopt a plan for short-term progress focused on conflict prevention and confidence building. This plan has three interlinked components, the details of which we will elaborate upon in this report:

- A Russian commitment to the nonuse of force against Georgia
- The conclusion of bilateral agreements between the government of Georgia and authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to address humanitarian and human security concerns
- Modification of existing Georgian and Russian policies that impede progress

This plan is in the interests of all sides. And implementing it does not entail any party reconsidering its positions on the issues that divide them.

The actions outlined in the plan are also the necessary first steps toward achieving a peaceful and just resolution of the conflicts within Georgia's internationally recognized borders. They may not inevitably lead to that outcome but without them that outcome is impossible.

In order to facilitate progress on these steps in the near term, the Obama administration should modify U.S. policies to focus on conflict resolution. Specifically, the United States should:

- Rhetorically make conflict resolution and the normalization of the Russia-Georgia relationship a centerpiece of the U.S. approach to the region
- Promote a narrative of the August 2008 war that focuses not on the parties' intentions but on the fact that all sides took actions that created a highly volatile security environment that ultimately led to the outbreak of hostilities
- Facilitate normalization of Russia-Georgia ties
- Minimize the extent to which disagreements in international forums on matters of principle impede progress on conflict resolution
- Develop a coherent policy on defensive arms provision that is consistent with conflict resolution
- Make any future engagement with Abkhazia and South Ossetia part of a conflict resolution strategy and work with the European Union to ensure it does the same

We should say at the outset that this report does not offer comprehensive political solutions to the conflicts. We believe there is little purpose in focusing on that until considerable forward movement on the conflict resolution process has taken place. But we do preview the more challenging subsequent steps that will also need to be part of the conflict resolution process prior to or as part of political settlements. These are issues that cannot be viably addressed now but they will need to be considered after other advances have been made:

- Full freedom of movement in and out of Abkhazia and South Ossetia
- The establishment of weapons-restricted zones in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and an eventual drawdown of military forces there to pre-August 2008 levels, in line with Russia's ceasefire commitments.
- The return of internally displaced persons to South Ossetia together with intensified discussions on practically implementing the rights of IDPs from Abkhazia
- Investigation of war crimes

While not diminishing the importance of these objectives, our focus in this report is on the mutually beneficial steps all sides can take now without forcing reconsideration of their positions on the issues that fundamentally divide them.

We'll start with a brief review of Washington debates about the conflicts and a description of current U.S. policy. We'll then explain why the time is right for a more proactive U.S. approach to the Georgia conflicts and detail the important but often overlooked progress that has been achieved since the war. The policy recommendations follow.

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