

# An End to Russian Military Bases in Georgia?

## The Implications of Past Withdrawals

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### **Introduction**

The Russian military presence in the South Caucasus continues to remain a challenge for the newly independent states of the region. Russia's policy towards the South Caucasus has undergone significant changes and can hardly be characterized as consistent. Still, while the concentration of Russian forces in the region was in decline through 2007, Russia still remains the sole external state with the readily available power to shape developments in the region.

The USSR maintained a substantial military presence in Georgia. The geopolitical position of Georgia made it strategically important and warranted locating several Soviet military bases within its territory. In mid-1993 an estimated 15,000 Russian troops and border guards remained on Georgian territory. Russia, as the successor state of the USSR, inherited its geopolitical interest in the South Caucasus and particularly in Georgia.

After the collapse of the USSR, Georgia initially did not press for Russian troop withdrawal as vigorously as did other former Soviet republics because it did not have enough personnel to protect its entire border. However, after defeat in a 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. This image of Russia prevailed in Georgian public opinion.

Over the past five years, relations between the two countries were characterized by tension, threats, recriminations, and mutual suspicion. President Saakashvili's unequivocally pro-Western orientation, particularly Georgia's ambition to join the North

Atlantic Treaty Organization, and promises that he would integrate Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Georgia by the end of his presidency, caused outrage in Moscow.

In the context of Russian-Georgian relations, perhaps the most sensitive issue was the status of Russian bases in Georgia. The presence of Russian troops became one of the major problems in the countries' bilateral relations after Russia agreed to the withdrawal of its bases under the provisions set forth in an agreement concluded at the 1999 Istanbul summit of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

The Russian military presence in conflict zones is still a major challenge for Georgia as Russia retains a far more powerful presence in the country than any other foreign state, none of which have sought to challenge its position as they are aware of their limitations to project power.

## **Preparing for Withdrawal**

Russia's main military bases in Georgia were near the cities of Akhalkalaki and Batumi. Their positions on the Turkish border, on a natural route from Turkey into the South Caucasus, and, in the case of Batumi, on the Black Sea long made these areas a strategic prize. After the collapse of the USSR, the issue of the withdrawal of the Russian military bases became a matter of principle for the Georgian government and the main issue in Russian-Georgian relations. For the Georgian government and the majority of the population the presence of the military bases was a remnant of Russian rule and one of the linchpins of unwanted Russian influence over Georgia.

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 Istanbul agreement, Russia wanted at least another decade to close these two bases and demanded hundreds of millions of dollars as compensation for relocating troops and material back to Russia.

However, the 2003 regime change in Georgia and the reestablishment of effective Georgian sovereignty in Adjara, the region in which Batumi is located, fundamentally altered the negotiations. Moscow understood that because both regions were located deep within Georgian territory, and under Georgian central control, 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.

## **The Akhalkalaki Military Base**

On June 27, 2007, Russia formally handed over its military base at Akhalkalaki to the Georgian government. The last 150 Russian troops left on the eve of the official handover. The Russians thus completed their withdrawal three months ahead of the December 2007 deadline. Fixed assets given to the Georgians reportedly included 196 buildings on an area of 128 hectares as well as a nearby combat training range.

The local Armenian population in the nearby regions (known collectively as Javakheti) was painfully affected by the Russian withdrawal from the Akhalkalaki base for economic and political reasons. In addition to its purely military function, the base also played a

social role as it was 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 political motive was no less important. Fear of neighboring Turkey is still very strong among the local Armenian population, as the conflicts that took place in the early twentieth century are still vivid in their memory. The Armenian community in Javakheti strongly believed that only Russia could protect them from the imagined Turkish aggression.

Today, the Georgian government conducts programs for the integration of the Armenian-speaking population of Javakheti into the Georgian state. To replace the base, the government has created various programs to provide alternative jobs to members of the population who became unemployed after the Russian withdrawal.

However, these promises notwithstanding, the population has remained skeptical and acts of protest have occurred in the region. This proves that the aftermath of the Russian military base withdrawal is not painless, and the Georgian government faces serious problems in the social integration of unemployed workers.

## **The Batumi Military Base**

Russia hoped to retain the Batumi base by relabeling it an “antiterrorist center.” The Georgian government originally came up with this idea in 2004 in order to restart Russian-blocked negotiations and to provide Moscow with a face-saving way to withdraw its troops. Tbilisi had envisaged the formation of one joint Georgian-Russian analytical antiterrorist center. The center would be under Georgian sovereign control and not located at any existing military base. It would be created in the wake of the garrisons’ departure and include several scores of Russian officers without troops or armaments.

Even at the time, however, some observers and politicians in Georgia worried that the accord contained loopholes that could potentially enable Russia to maintain a military presence in Georgia. Thus, public opinion indicated that citizens were uneasy about the project. Ultimately, due to their strained relations, it seems that neither Georgia nor Russia even theoretically considered the establishment of such a center in Batumi or elsewhere.

On November 13, 2007, the evacuation process ended for the 12<sup>th</sup> Russian military base in Batumi, and as a result it was also officially handed over to Georgia ahead of schedule. The withdrawal from Batumi meant that no Russian troops remained in Georgia except for peacekeepers in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Georgian government gave a positive assessment to the completion of the withdrawal of the military base and expressed hope that soon no Russian troops would be left in the conflict zones in the country’s territory.

Georgian government officials recognized that Russia’s withdrawal would have a broad economic impact on the region. As a result, the government subsequently promised new roads, social welfare support, and military food procurement contracts for local inhabitants. However, unanswered questions have surrounded the work prospects for the Georgians who were employed as military personnel at the Batumi base.

## **The Gudauta Base in Abkhazia**

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 stirred debate. The base has always been a significant factor in the Abkhazian conflict. The Georgian side and many Western independent observers claim that the Gudauta base provided principal military support to Abkhaz rebels during the war in 1992–1993. At the OSCE's 1999 Istanbul summit, Russia agreed to shut down its base at Gudauta and to withdraw troops and equipment. Subsequently, Russia pledged that, pursuant to the provisions of the OSCE agreement, military equipment had been completely removed from the base and the facility was to be used by Russian peacekeepers deployed in the Abkhazian conflict zone under the auspices of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). However, the Georgian authorities doubted the veracity of this statement and encouraged international monitoring of the military base with the participation of Georgian experts.

Russia later blocked OSCE inspections, although such inspections are mandatory under the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe. Moscow argued that Tbilisi must ensure the safety of the international monitoring mission. Both sides knew that Georgia could not undertake such responsibility for the territory, which is not under its control, and thus officials in Tbilisi believed that Russia used this circumstance in order to delay the process as long as possible.

Meanwhile, Tbilisi has sought to end the Russian peacekeepers' mandate in Abkhazia. Georgian politicians warned Russia against formally recognizing Abkhazia's independence after Tbilisi claimed that Moscow had stepped up its military presence in the conflict zone. In response, in a statement issued on November 21, 2007, the Russian Foreign Ministry pointed out that although Russian troops have withdrawn from bases in Georgia, Russian servicemen remain in the Abkhaz and South Ossetian conflict zones as peacekeepers. The Russian Foreign Ministry also criticized what it referred to as Tbilisi's habit of raising spurious complaints against Russia.

## **Conclusion**

The new Georgian state and its leaders faced a number of objective obstacles that suggested that the full withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgia would be inherently difficult, especially from conflict regions like Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These two small unresolved territorial conflicts remain legacies of the USSR's demise and have long been considered serious challenges for Georgia.

In recent years, the Georgian government pledged to establish "very good" relations with Russia, despite the fact that some political and military forces in Russia believed that the Georgian state-building project opposes Russian national interests. Russia has felt threatened by the sudden move of NATO and other Western military structures into an area which is very much part of its own backyard.

Through 2007, the situation regarding Russian military bases in Georgia appeared to be changing for the better. Russia had almost fulfilled its 1999 OSCE Istanbul commitments to withdraw from Georgia's military bases, though it still needed to reach an agreement with Georgia on the status or withdrawal of the Russian presence at the Gudauta base. Russia's

decision to withdraw from the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe treaty limiting military forces in Europe promised to affect the nearly completed process of withdrawal of Russian troops from Gudauta. Russian officials stated that the suspension of its participation in the treaty meant that Moscow would also stop providing information and allowing inspections of its heavy weapons. They also said that Moscow would decide unilaterally on how many tanks and/or aircraft to deploy.

At the same time, the Georgian parliament continued to discuss the issue of who would replace Russian peacekeepers in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict zone, seeking some kind of international peacekeeping force.

All these developments demonstrate the seriousness of the situation in the Caucasus until today and create new challenges and options in the region. While Russian troop withdrawal is clearly in Georgia's interest, the procedures associated with the planned antiterrorist agreement and its legal implications pose some risks. The Georgian side would never agree to create such a center, even under Georgian sovereignty. Georgia's desire for NATO membership is another factor influencing Tbilisi's position on withdrawal.

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

- Georgia has managed to dramatically transform into a stronger democracy in a very short period of time. Despite existing problems, the country's course towards democracy and integration into NATO is evident. Russia needs to recognize that a Western-integrated Georgia would pose no threat. On 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 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 economic and transportation sanctions 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 South Ossetia and Abkhazia. 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 operate under terms established in 1992-1993, but this framework may not be sufficient to build a contemporary lasting peace. Without substantial changes to the current peacekeeping framework, it is hard to imagine how the parties will arrive at a comprehensive solution.
- Due to the unhelpful stance of the Russian side, it has been impossible to carry out inspections of the Gudauta base that would verify its closure. At the same time, a one-time inspection is not good enough to prove closure of the military base. It is essential to take specific measures aimed at guaranteeing permanent transparency

in terms of further usage of certain facilities on the base.

Although it remains to be seen whether Georgia will be able to negotiate 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-or-break time for Georgia.

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