

Options for Resolution of the Conflict in Abkhazia

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Summary

Current prospects for resolving the conflict in the Abkhazia region of Georgia are poor. Framework agreements have been reached, but these merely paper over differences on the central issues at stake: the degree of Abkhaz autonomy, and the return of displaced Georgians to Abkhazia. Neither side shows evidence of good faith or restraint from the use of force; public opinion on both sides is even more hard-line. Russia's closing of Abkhazia's borders to most trade is acting to worsen the conflict, causing public opinion in Abkhazia to harden further while encouraging unrealistic expectations in Georgia which could easily lead to a new war. A more even-handed US position promoting an easing of the Russian blockade on Abkhazia in exchange for Abkhazian concessions, while simultaneously pressuring both sides to compromise, would better promote reconciliation while preserving the principles of territorial integrity and the return of refugees, as well as US economic interests.

Background

Georgians and Abkhaz have lived on their current territories for thousands of years, but are two distinct peoples speaking virtually unrelated languages. Their history includes periods in which Abkhazia was part of Georgia, and periods in which it was not. Tsarist Russia annexed Georgia and Abkhazia in the early nineteenth century, expelling most Akhaz later in the century after repeated rebellions. The Communists briefly gave Abkhazia the status of "union republic" separate from Georgia, but after 1931 Stalin reduced it to an "autonomous republic" under Georgian authority, pushing the Abkhaz to adopt Russian or Georgian language and identity, while resettling Georgians and others in Abkhazia. The result was to reduce the proportion of Abkhaz to 17% of the population of Abkhazia, raising among the Abkhaz a fear of total group extinction.

The recent conflict began when Gorbachev's policy of glasnost in the late 1980s allowed both groups to start large nationalist movements. While pursuing independence, many Georgian nationalists also began demanding a "Georgia for the Georgians," meaning abolition of autonomous status for the Abkhaz and other ethnic minorities; the most extreme demanded the minorities' expulsion. The Abkhaz, in contrast, began pushing for the restoration of their early status as a Soviet republic independent of Georgia.

After Georgia gained its independence in 1992, Abkhazia tried to assert its own independence, while offering to form a weak federation with Georgia. Georgia, under the leadership of Eduard

Shevardnadze, responded by invading Abkhazia in August 1992, trying to reestablish full Georgian authority; one Georgian general expressed a willingness to annihilate the entire Abkhaz nation. The war that followed was marked by severe ethnically motivated violence against civilians, including murder, rape, and plundering of civilian property by combatants and civilians on both sides.

At the diplomatic level, the war was marked by a string of broken cease-fire and troop-withdrawal agreements. Militarily, the Georgians had the advantage at first, as they employed their share of the former Soviet army's weapons against Abkhazia. Eventual Abkhaz success in September 1993 came as the result of unofficial aid to the Abkhaz from other peoples of the North Caucasus, including Chechens and Cossacks, and from the Russian military. After driving Georgian troops from Abkhaz territory, the Abkhaz proceeded to brutally expel virtually all Georgians. In the ensuing years, many Georgian refugees from the Gali district, the part of Abkhazia nearest to Georgia proper, returned to their homes. The situation remained unsettled, however, as Abkhaz police forces routinely robbed and harassed returning Georgians, while Georgian partisans repeatedly attacked Abkhaz police. In May 1998, the Georgian partisans launched an apparent attempt to gain full military control of Gali district, but were quickly defeated. The Abkhaz forces then re-expelled most of the Georgian population and burned many of their homes.

Current Positions

In 1994 the two sides agreed to a framework for regulation of the conflict, based upon construction of a common state. A separate 1994 agreement called for the return to Abkhazia of displaced ethnic Georgians. The government of Georgia interprets the common state to mean the inclusion of Abkhazia in a federal Georgia, while Abkhazia insists on juridical equality with Georgia in a new, to-be-named confederation. While the two sides have generally agreed on the competence of the common government (to include foreign relations, foreign trade, customs and external defense), disagreement over details, including the Abkhaz demand for security guarantees, is significant. Additionally, public opinion on both sides opposes compromise. Georgian public opinion sees Abkhaz as mere guests on Georgian territory and opposes all but the weakest form of cultural autonomy for Abkhazia, if any at all. Indeed, Georgia still supports an extremist ethnic Georgian government in exile for Abkhazia which supports renewed war and denies any legitimacy to the current Abkhazian authorities. Abkhaz public opinion, in contrast, maintains that Georgian brutality during the war and unreliability after it prove the need for Abkhazian independence; most Abkhaz want nothing to do with Georgia or Georgians.

Georgia claims a population of 250,000 displaced persons, and demands their immediate repatriation, with appropriate guarantees for their security (including expanded responsibility for the mostly Russian (formally, CIS) peacekeeping force in Gali district). The Abkhaz argue that half of these people have since found new homes, and that the Abkhaz economy cannot absorb the rest unless the Russian blockade is lifted. The Abkhaz government also argues that since CIS peacekeeping forces failed to prevent partisan activity in Gali, they cannot be relied upon. Instead, they argue, security in Gali depends on the willingness of those who return to cooperate with Abkhazian authorities instead of shooting at them.

Meanwhile, the Abkhaz population strongly opposes the return of displaced persons to the rest of Abkhazia, as they are thought to have participated in the wave of crimes that took place during the Georgian occupation. They consider the refugees as having returned to their real homeland of Georgia, and view them as a potential fifth column who, upon their return, would spark renewed conflict by pressing for subordination of Abkhazia to Georgia. Of further concern is the possibility that some Abkhaz may be willing to kill returnees according to old customs of blood revenge. Reconciliation is further inhibited by both sides' unwillingness to admit mistakes: for example, Georgians deny their responsibility for starting the war, while Abkhaz deny practicing ethnic cleansing against Georgians. The most important area of progress--the return of some 60,000 Georgian refugees to the Gali district--was undone by Georgia's attempt to gain military control of the region using partisan forces, and by the persecution carried out by the Abkhaz after the Georgian military defeat. Though diplomatic efforts continue, so does sporadic violence in the Gali district, diminishing the prospects for any near-term diplomatic breakthrough.

Policy Options

Georgia is strategically located between Russia and NATO ally Turkey, and contains one of the few viable routes for exporting the vast reserves of Caspian Sea oil and gas to world markets. Stabilizing the country by resolving the Abkhazian conflict is therefore in the interest of the United States. The US has three basic options for promoting such a resolution.

1. Support Georgia. This is the current US policy, which aims to strengthen Georgia with economic and military aid while acquiescing in the Russian economic blockade of Abkhazia. The US also supports giving CIS peacekeepers the task of ensuring security for the Georgian refugees returning to Gali district. The aim of these policies is to safeguard US interests and stabilize the situation by ensuring respect for Georgia's territorial integrity and the return of refugees. This policy, however, is unlikely to work. The blockade encourages a siege mentality, not flexibility, among the Abkhaz. The CIS peacekeepers were unable to achieve the relatively simple task of preventing the infiltration of Georgian partisans through the current security zone, suggesting that they would be even less effective at providing security for Georgian civilians in a larger zone. The Georgians, meanwhile, seem inclined to renew the war once they believe they can win. Renewed war would seriously harm US interests. A new Georgian defeat would further destabilize the region, threatening US strategic and economic interests--including the Baku-Supsa oil pipeline, which might be subject to Abkhaz attack. It would also mark a success for Russia's policy of promoting instability. A Georgian victory might be no better, likely leading to the expulsion of most Abkhaz, who might then carry on a guerrilla war against Georgia--again likely targeting the oil pipeline--from bases in the North Caucasus.

2. Tilt Toward Abkhazia. Since US tolerance of wars against would-be secessionists (as in Abkhazia or Chechnya) has important costs, one might argue for a policy supportive of Abkhaz aims. As part of such a policy, the US might consider de facto recognition of the independence of victims of such wars, establishing informal diplomatic relations (such as the US currently maintains with Taiwan) as a way to avoid recognizing de jure violations of states' territorial integrity. However, such a policy would revolutionize international legal practice, encouraging

separatists everywhere and undermining US relations with important friendly states. This is not a realistic policy alternative for the near future.

3. Promote reconciliation. This is a more neutral policy which would promote Georgian-Abkhaz cultural and economic ties without insisting on Georgian preeminence on all issues. Both sides favor a deal involving the return of displaced persons to Abkhazia in exchange for an end to the economic blockade, but they disagree on timing. It would best proceed in stages, beginning with Gali district.

The Georgian side would have to cease support for the government-in-exile and put an end to partisan activity, while the Abkhaz must improve the behavior of its police forces toward returning Georgian refugees, and accept international monitoring and certification of progress as a condition for continued relaxation of sanctions. US policy would still support the territorial integrity of Georgia, but without predetermining whether the eventual relationship would be a vertical federation, as Georgians prefer, or a horizontal confederation more like Bosnia's post-Dayton structure, which the Abkhaz prefer. Both sides would still be pressed to take concrete steps to work toward common goals, but would have greater incentives to do so. The Abkhaz could gain economically without conceding to Georgia in every transaction; while, if the Abkhaz agreed, the Georgians would have to relax their stance or see sanctions lifted by the international community anyway. US aid, especially military aid, should also be made contingent on improved Georgian behavior. Both sides would also be pressed to take responsibility for, and to apologize for, their own past misbehavior (including initiation of fighting and war crimes). In terms of US interests, this strategy is the most promising alternative.

Conclusion

The current US policy is not working. The US tilt toward Georgia encourages both sides to become more intransigent, while a policy of relying on CIS peacekeepers to provide security for returning Georgian refugees cannot work because the CIS peacekeepers have been proven ineffective. A more even-handed approach would be more promising.

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