

**The Withdrawal of Russian Military Bases from Georgia:  
Not Solving Anything**  
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In March 2005 negotiations over a long-stalled issue of Russian military bases in Georgia sharply accelerated. In the end of May, the foreign ministers of the two countries signed a joint statement, which stipulated that the withdrawal of bases would begin in 2005 and would conclude in 2008. Georgia, with good reason to celebrate, has declared once again that the removal of this thorny issue will facilitate friendly Russian-Georgian relations (despite other issues, however, that need to be solved in particular the difficult questions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia). Russia responded with a polite statement citing centuries-old Russian-Georgian friendship.

In reality, the withdrawal of the bases will likely result in a rather lengthy period of even more bitter confrontation over the implementation of the agreement. Encouraged by its victory, Tbilisi will probably be even more assertive about the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia while Moscow will probably be even less forthcoming. Each side attaches conditions to its declaration of friendship: Georgia claims “we will be genuine friends if...,” while Russia insists “if we are friends, then...” and each expects the other to provide tangible proof of friendship.

Deep down, both countries regard the other as hostile. For Tbilisi, Russia is an imperialist, neocolonial state that continues to deny genuine independence to former Soviet republics. For Moscow, Georgia is a conduit of American influence that seeks to undermine Russian influence and interests under the guise of democratization. Against this background, the withdrawal of Russian bases is likely to have at least moderately negative consequences for Russian-Georgian relations. As a result of its insistence on early removal of the bases, Tbilisi will lose an important lever vis-à-vis Moscow. In times of crisis, Russia will be less motivated to exercise restraint.

Furthermore, the sudden turnaround in Russia’s attitude toward Georgia suggests an even more profound change. The withdrawal of bases, the settlement of debts, and the delimitation of border - all transpiring in the spring of 2005 - seem to indicate that Moscow seeks to turn Georgia into a genuinely “foreign” state. Georgia will be the first among 12 former Soviet republics (three Baltic states were regarded as “foreign” almost immediately after the breakup of the Soviet Union) to encounter this status and therefore

a showcase of what can happen to a former republic if it decides to break all ties to Russia.

The new policy will hardly translate into sanctions or other forms of outright pressure, which many in Moscow demand, but rather into indifference and market-based trade relations (including prices on oil, gas, and energy), as well as a full-scale visa regime (hurting Georgians who seek jobs in Russia and consequently the Georgian economy). Pressure with regard to the Pankisi Gorge, where Russia claims, Chechens fighting against Moscow find refuge, is likely to become stronger as well.

## **Background**

According to some calculations, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Russian Armed Forces inherited about 1,600 bases and facilities in Georgia. In 1995, the two countries signed an agreement on their withdrawal, although the document was never ratified by the Russian Duma. Nevertheless, in the second half of the 1990s, the Ministry of Defense accelerated the withdrawal, closure of bases, and the transfer of facilities to Georgia. The vast majority of the facilities were closed between 1997 and 1999; in 1998 the Russian Navy completed the withdrawal, and in 1999 the border guards left as well.

The process was riddled with conflicts. Since the agreement was not in force, the Russian military withdrew hastily and simply abandoned the dilapidated facilities. Georgia calculated the amount it was owed for lost and damaged property to be between \$3 and \$10 billion (depending on the source). In Russia, the retreat was vehemently criticized by nationalist and communist leaders. By the end of 1999 only four bases remained, and Boris Yeltsin and Eduard Shevardnadze signed a joint statement in Istanbul regarding their fate. The two bases in Vaziani and Gudauta were to be closed down in a short time, while the timeframe for the bases in Akhalkalaki and Batumi was to be negotiated separately (an agreement was anticipated by the end of 2002, but this deadline kept getting pushed back). Simultaneously Russia agreed, within the framework of an OSCE summit in Istanbul, to reduce the equipment limited by the Conventional Arms Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE) on Georgia's territory by the end of 2000.

Russian policy regarding its bases in Georgia in the second half of the 1990s produces a distinct impression that the Ministry of Defense under the leadership of Igor Sergeev sought early closure on the issue. The military announced that it did not have the money to finance the bases that were no longer needed. Moreover, leaving them in an unfriendly country seemed even less sensible.

The implementation of the CFE obligations proceeded smoothly, whereas the closure of the Vaziani and Gudauta bases quickly became a hotly contested issue. Russia began to drag its feet and the agreement on the withdrawal was finalized only during Eduard Shevardnadze's visit to Moscow in the summer of 2000. Russia agreed to Georgia's demand that the bases be closed in the summer of 2001, but Tbilisi had to concede the Russian military the right to use the military airport at Vaziani.

The timetable for the closure of the two remaining bases, in Batumi and Akhalkalaki, remained undetermined. Georgia insisted that the bases be withdrawn by the end of 2003. Subsequently, it changed the timeframe to a 3-year period. The Russian military initially proposed a 15-year period, but then settled on 11 years. The price of the withdrawal was estimated at no less than \$500 million.

The marked change in policy probably resulted from the “changing of the guard” in the Ministry of Defense soon after Vladimir Putin became president. Already in the spring of 2000 Igor Sergeev’s position significantly weakened (he left his post a year later) while the status of the Chief of the General Staff, Anatoli Kvashnin, began to rise. The attitude of the Ministry of Defense became closely reminiscent of the position taken by nationalists inside and outside of the Duma.

The military regarded conditions of the withdrawal a matter of principle. It insisted that Russia would not repeat the hasty withdrawal from Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when troops often ended up in the “open field” without barracks or infrastructure. Hence, the demand for 11 years and \$500 million, which were supposedly required to create new bases in the Russian territory for troops and especially officers, as well as military equipment.

Russia also demanded that Georgia promise that it would not allow any other foreign military bases on its territory after the Russian withdrawal. The demand was made out of concern that U.S. or NATO bases might eventually appear in the country.

Georgia at first wanted to transform the bases into a joint anti-terrorist center, effectively guaranteeing reduced Russian military presence in its territory. Although the center was originally proposed by Eduard Shevardnadze as a compromise, Georgia quickly regretted the initiative because the Russian military tried to use the joint-venture as an opportunity to preserve its presence in Georgia. Furthermore, as the accusations of Georgia in supporting Chechen fighters escalated, the center could become a genuine liability to Tbilisi.

The circumstances surrounding the bases themselves were also complicated. The Akhalkalaki base was located in a predominantly Armenian region (the local Armenian population has been estimated to be no less than 80 percent) where the livelihood of several thousand locals depended on the base. The population reacted nervously and even angrily to the prospect of losing the base, which was a major source of employment. The Batumi base was located in Ajaria, a region that was de facto outside of Tbilisi’s control. Ajaria’s leader Aslan Abashidze saw the Russian base as a political guarantee and objected to its removal (the presence of the base did not save him in 2004, when he was quickly deposed by the new Georgian government led by Mikheil Saakashvili).

The issue of bases was just one of many problems of the worsening relations under Eduard Shevardnadze, but it quickly emerged as a symbol of territorial integrity alongside the problem of separatist regions of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Ajaria. Russia continued stonewalling while the Georgian government periodically tried to

pressure Moscow by making life for the Russians living on the bases difficult (denial of visas to military personnel, interruption of water and energy supply, etc). For its part, Russia used the most obvious weapon at its disposal: electric power and oil. The governments of both sides were relatively cautious, but parliaments adopted inflammatory resolutions and demanded radical, even provocative actions.

The Rose Revolution, which replaced Eduard Shevardnadze with Mikheil Saakashvili, did not create much change regarding this issue. Moscow anticipated that Tbilisi would soften its approach to a number of issues, including that of the bases (in exchange for the Russian support in the removal of Shevardnadze), but the new leadership soon made the removal of all foreign troops from Georgia a high-priority issue. Throughout 2004 there seemed to be no hope at resolving the deadlock.

## **Toward an Agreement**

After a year of increasingly acrimonious relations, in the spring of 2005, the situation suddenly began to change. In mid-March, the Georgian parliament adopted a new resolution stipulating that if an agreement on the withdrawal is not reached by May 15, 2005 and withdrawal not completed by January 1, 2006, Russian bases would be effectively put under siege. Georgia would issue no visas to military personnel, no water or energy would be provided for the base, and a ban on movement of all military equipment and training outside bases would be issued. Instead of a customary angry response, the Russian Ministry of Defense suddenly declared that it would need 3 to 4 years to withdraw troops—a sharp reduction of the seemingly iron-clad 11-year period (the Ministry of Defense announced the 3-4 year schedule before parliament adopted its resolution). The price tag was reduced from \$500 to \$250-300 million. Russia also agreed to begin the withdrawal in 2005 instead of 2008. The first batches of equipment, in fact, began leaving Georgia even before the Joint Statement was signed.

The new proposal was formally tabled in late March and received a generally positive response from Tbilisi, which dropped its initial demand about completing the withdrawal by the end of 2005 and proposed instead the beginning of 2008 – just prior to the parliamentary elections. Since the Russian proposal stipulated the end of 2008, the thorniest problem was almost resolved in the first exchange of proposals.

At the moment, it is still unclear whether Georgia will pick up part of the cost of the withdrawal; Russian and Georgian officials and parliamentarians make contradictory statements. In March, in an effort to placate local opposition, Mikheil Saakashvili visited the Akhalkalaki base and promised that the Georgian Armed Forces would continue to employ the local population at the same scale.

Georgian negotiators' proposal for the creation of an "anti-terrorist center," caused an angry reaction from the opposition. The members of parliament, unhappy about the disagreements, no longer wanted the anti-terrorist center. It does not appear that the arrangement has served as a cover for continued Russian military presence in Georgia.

In the end of April, Mikheil Saakashvili declared that no other foreign military bases would be created in Georgia after the Russian withdrawal and that Georgia planned to adopt a law to that effect. This was probably the maximum concession Russia could extract from Tbilisi; the promise would become part of internal Georgian legislation instead of an international agreement.

Negotiations continued in spite of Mikheil Saakashvili's refusal to visit Moscow for the Victory Day celebration on May 9, which was perceived by Moscow to be a highly unfriendly act. Instead, only a few days after May 9 the two sides reportedly agreed to compromise on the end date of the withdrawal – either early spring of 2008 or mid-year. Georgia, for its part, refrained from implementing the sanctions threatened against the bases parliament in March. By all indications, the agreement ought to be signed in the summer of 2005, although there are still many delicate issues to resolve.

## **Past Mistakes**

The resolution of a long-standing conflict is a positive development, but it should also be recognized that the behavior of both sides has been profoundly irrational, especially on the Russian side.

There was little, if any, reason for Russia to insist on retaining the bases in the first place. Their military value is questionable, if not non-existent. Troops number only 3,000 people with 152 tanks, 241 armored personnel carriers and 140 artillery pieces. 41 percent of privates and noncommissioned officers at the Batumi base and the majority at the Akhalkalaki base are locals (servicemen at Akhalkalaki have Russian citizenship). Certainly, the withdrawal of 150 officers and a limited number of privates and sergeants did not require 11 years and \$500 million. The equipment is outdated and is hardly needed; some Russia experts believe that it would be more cost-effective to eliminate it in situ. In other words, the withdrawal had few parallels to the events of 1989-1992.

It was clear for many years that bases were not welcome and the host country was not friendly, much less an ally. Georgia did not see a threat from Turkey and did not request security guarantees from Russia. Instead, Russia itself has long been seen as the only security threat. Instead of providing for security of Georgia and Russia, the bases have always been a powerful irritant.

Furthermore, Russian troops at the bases, as well as the headquarters in Tbilisi are extremely vulnerable; Georgian government has many times threatened to cut water and electricity to Russian facilities and deny visas for the turnover of personnel. Sometimes these threats have even been carried out. Effectively, by keeping the bases Russia itself gave Tbilisi an efficient lever against itself – threatening to introduce restrictions could limit Russia's own freedom of action vis-à-vis Georgia.

The only feasible explanation for the stubborn attempts to retain military presence is the perception, dating back to the early period of the Cold War, if not earlier, that military bases equal influence. According to that view, Georgia remained part of Russia's "sphere

of influence” as long as military bases remained there. Accordingly, the withdrawal of bases equals irrevocable “loss” of the country. Similarly, the establishment of U.S. bases on the periphery of Russia is equated with the loss of whole regions.

That view was probably true in the past, but nowadays the relationship is reversed. Military bases are the result, not the instrument of influence. They only have meaning when the host country seeks security guarantees and wants military presence to solidify these guarantees and perhaps gain political and financial benefits. Bases established against the will of the host country are seen as a symbol of occupation and hostile control. In other words, the limited influence Russia still has in Georgia will not diminish when the bases are closed, nor will it increase, contrary to the view of many idealists.

Although Georgia’s desire to get rid of foreign military bases is natural, it does not appear well calculated. The bases were and could have remained an important element in its relations with Moscow due to their vulnerability. Their withdrawal should have been among the last items on the agenda, not among the first. This lever could not be used often, but the very vulnerability of the Russian military personnel to pressure could moderate Russian policy. Seen from that perspective, Georgia’s success only makes it more vulnerable as there are precious few ways Tbilisi can influence Moscow.

The insistence on early removal of the bases, whose stubbornness can only be matched by the stubborn desire of Russia to retain them, aside from emotions, has only one explanation. It is an attempt to divert the attention of the population from increasingly acute domestic problems toward achieving complete sovereignty of the country, which includes, in addition to control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the removal of Russian bases. The present government is not really different from the previous one and, it seems, Mikheil Saakashvili has used this issue perhaps even more forcefully than his predecessor. His recent article in *The New York Times* (Mikheil Saakashvili, “Time for a Return to Yalta,” May 10, 2005, p. A10) suggests that he harbors Herculean plans for spreading of democracy not only to other post-Soviet states, but also to Zimbabwe, Cuba and Burma, even as economic and social reforms seems to have grounded to a halt. The victory over the Russian military bases will hardly help him on the domestic front.

## **Thorny Future**

An agreement on the withdrawal of Russian military bases will hardly improve Russian-Georgian relations. If past can serve as a guide, the process and the aftermath of the withdrawal will be riddled with conflicts and mutual accusations over an almost infinite list of small issues – financial, legal, environmental, psychological, and political, which will negate its potential positive impact.

Of greater importance is the possibility that the very nature of the relationship will change. Although it is possible that Georgia’s decision to introduce a highly restrictive regime against the bases played a role in the Russian decision to make important concessions, the reasons might lie deeper. In the spring of 2005 Moscow sought to

resolve several long-standing disagreements. In addition to the issue of military bases, the two sides signed an agreement on Georgia's debt to Russia and in April the two countries reportedly finalized the delimitation of their border. Whether these actions represent an attempt to genuinely remove all disagreements is doubtful.

A clue to Moscow's policy could be found in a statement of foreign minister Sergei Lavrov in the Duma from May 2004. Lavrov declared, specifically, that only "friends of Russia" could count on economic and political benefits such as low prices on oil, gas, and energy, while the rest had to be prepared for relations based on market principles both in trade and in policy. Thus, it seems likely that Russia has decided to make Georgia the first genuinely "foreign" state among the twelve former republics (three Baltic states have been treated as "foreign" since the breakup of the Soviet Union), which Tbilisi has sought for the last fifteen years.

This status will not be easy for Tbilisi. It does appear likely that energy prices will rise to the world level. Georgians will probably still be required to obtain visas to travel to Russia and, more importantly, they will find it more difficult to legally obtain work permits. The Russian position with regard to the remaining two separatist regions (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) will be less likely to change in the near future. The efforts of the present leadership of Georgia to spread democracy in the territory of the former Soviet Union will encounter tougher response. There is an almost unending list of small things that will make life for Georgia more difficult.

Vladimir Putin will hardly listen to hardliners in his own government and in the Duma who demand sanctions and other forms of outright pressure, at least not in the near future. In the above-mentioned statement, Sergei Lavrov has clearly declared that sanctions are not an effective option anyway. This means that Russian businesses will continue to operate in Georgia and Russian investment is likely to increase; the visible role of Russian energy companies in that country will hardly translate into any interruptions in energy supply.

Instead, policy will probably be characterized by studied indifference and deaf ear to any complaints or initiatives coming from Tbilisi. Above all, the Russian government will refrain from anything that could alleviate the domestic economic and social problems in Georgia.

For the United States, this means that, first of all, it will have to deal with a sharp increase in the "war of words," especially on the part of Georgia, and calls for defense against the northern neighbor. It also seems likely that the next administration (i.e., after the withdrawal of Russian bases is complete) will face Georgia's requests for U.S. military presence in the territory of that country: it is highly unlikely that the political statements made recently by Mikheil Saakashvili will hold for long. Finally, Georgia will ask for more economic and financial assistance, both to itself and for activities to spread democracy elsewhere. These requests will go hand in hand with increasingly loud complaints about Russian imperialism. It is possible that the present Georgian government is counting on revenue from the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, but the

revenue will not come sufficiently soon and will hardly cover the needs of the Georgian government plagued by economic woes.

Granted, these problems are not insurmountable, nor particularly worrisome. In most regards they will represent a continuation of the current problems, perhaps on a somewhat greater scale. It is just advisable to keep in mind that the withdrawal of Russian military bases from Georgia will not necessarily stabilize the Russian-Georgian relations.

In addition to the effect on Russian-Georgian relations, the withdrawal of the bases could also have a broader geopolitical impact. First, it will provide a boost to Russia's many years of attempts to have the CFE-2 Treaty (the adaptation of the original CFE to the post-Warsaw Pact conditions) enter into force and, above all, made the Baltic states join it. The implementation of the Istanbul agreements on bases has been among the key reasons cited by NATO why CFE-2 could not enter into force. If, in addition to the withdrawal of bases from Georgia, Russia also removes its remaining personnel from Transdnier (an increasingly likely possibility because Moscow has effectively ceded its role in that conflict to the United States and the EU), NATO will have to face CFE-2's entry into force head-on. A central issue with CFE-2 is the inclusion of Baltic states, which so far have refused to join the treaty citing the situation in Georgia and Moldova. In spite of possible political turmoil, the entry into force of CFE-2, will have a positive effect on NATO-Russia relations because it will introduce much-needed predictability into the military balance in that area.

Moldova, in turn, will likely turn into another "genuinely foreign" post-Soviet state and will face problems similar to those that Georgia will face: indifference, problems with Moldovans trying to find a job in Russia, energy prices, and unfavorable treatment of its products in the Russian market.

In the grand scheme of things, resolution of some conflicts, such as bases in Georgia and Moldova, has both positive and negative implications. On the one hand, they represent the closure of painful and often bloody heritage of the breakup of the Soviet Union and the reduction of Russian commitments and claims. On the other, Russia will be less vulnerable and, perhaps more importantly, less engaged. Paradoxically, these conflicts were bridges that made Russia engage both with former Soviet republics it did not like and with Western powers, which participated in negotiations. To keep "beachheads," Moscow had to be in touch and had to moderate its behavior or make small concessions here and there. Reduced level of engagement is not truly dangerous, but not necessarily welcome either.