

# Russia's role

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**R**ussia has played a variety of roles in the Georgia–Abkhazia conflict and peace process. Despite conflicting perceptions of its conduct during the war, Russia was instrumental in establishing the ceasefire that has lasted since 1994. Through the deployment of CIS peacekeeping forces and through its efforts as a mediator Russia, the major regional power, remains deeply engaged in the search for a settlement. But has Russia's involvement stabilized the conflict at the cost of freezing it and has its political manoeuvring and power politics undermined its authority and diminished its peacemaking capability?

### Strategic interests

The Caucasus was a strategic borderland during the expansion of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. The Russian Federation's attempts to secure its external borders following the collapse of the Soviet Union has emphasized that this is still so. The interrelationship of ethnic groups such as the Abkhaz and Adyghs has made the North and South Caucasus a zone in which instability flows across borders. Russia's strategic concerns include its military bases in Georgia, road and rail links to the South Caucasus running through Abkhazia, Black Sea ports, the tourist industry and the Russian minority in Abkhazia. Economic concerns, particularly those relating to oil pipeline routes, have become increasingly prominent aspects of Russia's relationship with the Caucasus and have merged into broader political interests.

Security and control assumed a new importance when conflicts erupted in the early 1990s. Russia wanted the international community to recognize its role as guarantor of the peace in the former Soviet Union. The search for security, co-operation and legitimacy has had a major influence on Moscow's regional strategy and its attitudes to peacekeeping and peacemaking. However, Russian policies have been inconsistent and at times contradictory,



reflecting a decade of struggle between neo-imperialist and isolationist political factions to determine foreign policy. Balancing these factions on the Caucasian stage has often led to a gulf between rhetoric and the practical fulfilment of policy.

## Russia and the end of the war

Such was the nature of Georgia's defeat in Abkhazia that, coupled with Gamsakhurdia's rebellion in October 1993, its leadership feared the disintegration of Georgia itself. President Shevardnadze felt that Russian support was necessary to prevent Gamsakhurdia's rebellion succeeding and entered the CIS as the price for retaining power and holding the country together. Georgia's fragility provided the context in which negotiations with Abkhazia took place over the following months.

Intensive negotiations, under the aegis of the UN and with active mediation from Russia, were dominated by a number of strategic concerns. Georgia sought ways to redefine its relationship with Russia to ensure its territorial integrity and to regain Abkhazia. In February 1994 Russia and Georgia signed a series of agreements that provided for Russia to assist the development of the Georgian army, for the deployment of Russian border guards and, critically, for Russia's right to keep its military bases in Georgia. In return Georgia's territorial integrity was recognized but no specific arrangements were made for settling the conflict.

The Abkhaz entered the negotiation process concerned about the restructuring of Russia's relations with Georgia but also worried that Russian disengagement would jeopardize their military victory and the prospects of capitalizing on it politically. As a result the sides wanted a different type of ceasefire and peacekeeping force: the Georgians wanted the deployment of peacekeepers throughout Abkhazia to allow a mass return of IDPs whereas the Abkhaz wanted a clearly delimited ceasefire line along the Inguri River to demarcate the territory they had taken in battle. Russia's interest was to ensure that the peacekeepers and the peace process were under its control. The UN was prepared to hand Russia responsibility for peacekeeping, partly because of a lack of progress in reaching a political settlement, partly because it lacked capacity to deploy a peacekeeping force itself and partly due to a recognition that Georgia and Abkhazia were in Russia's sphere of interest. While Russia publicly expressed regret at the UN's failure to assume a more significant role, this suited its interests, allowing it to strengthen its roles as peacekeeper and mediator.

## Assigning peacekeeping functions

The negotiations involving the UN and Russia culminated in the signing of a ceasefire agreement on 4 April and the Moscow Agreement on 14 May 1994 which confirmed the establishment of a peacekeeping operation. Although nominally a CIS force it was, and has remained, entirely Russian. The PKF was deployed to replace the Russian force that had separated the parties since November 1993.

The Moscow Agreement provided for a Security Zone of twelve kilometres on each side of the Inguri River dividing Georgian and Abkhaz territory, and extended a further twelve kilometres to form a Restricted Weapons Zone. The objective of the CISPKF presence has been to separate the conflicting parties and provide sufficient security for the return of IDPs. Despite maintaining the ceasefire, the size of the force (which rarely numbered more than 1,500 although technically it could comprise 3,000 troops), its mandate, its training and equipment and its co-operation with UNOMIG have not been adequate to ensure a rigid separation between the parties at all times. In fact the porous ceasefire line has been a major source of tension between the sides and has led to over sixty CISPKF fatalities. With this in mind the CIS Summit in March 1997 took a decision to expand the peacekeeping operation.

Criticism of the activities of the peacekeeping force increased sharply as a direct result of both parties' discontent about its role in the events of May 1998. The Abkhaz criticized its failure to prevent intrusions by Georgian guerrillas. The Georgians condemned it for not preventing the expulsion of Georgians from the Gali region, as well as for not providing greater security for them over the preceding years. General Sergei Korobko, the CISPKF Commander-in-Chief, concluded that both sides viewed the peacekeeping force as an instrument for achieving their own military and political goals. Not succeeding in this, Georgia has aimed at replacing the Russian force with an international one and argued for an expansion of the mandate to include peace enforcement and policing functions over the whole of Abkhazia.

Any changes in the mandate or its extension have to be agreed by both sides. On 31 July 1998, President Shevardnadze withheld approval for its prolongation, issuing instead a declaration about the inexpediency of the CISPKF withdrawal. At the CIS Heads of State Summit meeting on 2 April 1999, the mandate was retrospectively renewed to that date, but not continued further. As a result, not only is the brief of the peacekeeping mission under question, but also its legal foundation. The UN has displayed no inclination to take on peacekeeping responsibilities, and even less to authorize a peace enforcement operation. Its caution was shown by the modesty of Secretary-General Kofi Annan's May 1998

proposal to increase the number of internationally recruited, lightly armed personnel to protect the unarmed UNOMIG in the aftermath of hostage-taking incidents involving UNOMIG personnel.

## Russia as a mediator

Throughout the peace process Russia has played a dual mediating role. On the one hand, acting on its own, Russia has convened separate and joint meetings with the parties, frequently aimed at developing proposals which could be adopted by the UN negotiating process. On the other hand, Russia has played an instrumental role in the multilateral forums of the CIS and the UN and as a member of the Friends of the UN Secretary-General on Georgia.

Russia has been able to initiate separate talks at a senior level on key issues dividing the parties precisely because it is an interested party with complex and long-standing political ties to both sides. Russian mediation has sometimes blurred the boundary between influence and pressure, pushing the parties towards concessions partly in search of a solution but also to retain the initiative itself. As early as July 1995, for instance, Russia succeeded in having the Protocol on the Settlement of the Georgian–Abkhaz Conflict, which allowed for a federative structure, initialled by both sides. Abkhazia subsequently disavowed its representative's signature insisting on establishing confederative relations with Georgia instead. This indicates that Russia's use of pressure to get agreement was sometimes counterproductive.

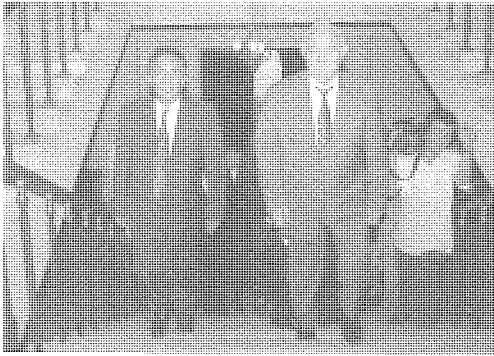
Russia only gradually established a proper diplomatic infrastructure to deal with the conflict. The Ministry of Defence negotiated the ceasefire, but since the beginning of the war in Chechnya and the appointment of Evgenii Primakov as Foreign Minister, the Foreign Ministry has assumed the leading role. Nevertheless, a gap persists between the military and political elements of Russian peacekeeping. The CISPKF command has to take decisions of a political nature on its own and its weekly consultations with the conflicting parties and UNOMIG officials in the security zone are used to address tensions on the ground. However, while making a certain political contribution to the settlement process, the CISPKF command has only limited influence. While Shevardnadze has spoken in favour of establishing a CIS mission head the Russian Foreign Ministry has not yet put the appointment of a high-ranking political official in the conflict zone onto the agenda.

The peace process has been characterized by a lack of clarity in the formation of Russian policy. In April 1998, the Ministry for Co-operation with CIS Member States, which included South Caucasian problems as a priority, was



Source: E. Kezashvili/Georgian FotoInformation Agency

**Primakov, Ardzinba and Shevardnadze in Tbilisi, August 1997**



Source: B. Kezerashvili/Georgian Information Agency

**Primakov, Ardzinba and Shevardnadze in Tbilisi, August 1997**

disbanded due to its ineffectiveness. The distribution of responsibilities between other departments is not clear-cut despite a decision to hand co-ordination to the Foreign Ministry which continues to play the central role in the elaboration and realization of policy relating to the conflict. However, co-operation with the central executive authorities is not always co-ordinated. At the CIS Summit meeting in October 1997, for instance, President Yeltsin supported an amendment tabled by Shevardnadze in accordance with which the economic reconstruction of the region and the normalization of the border and customs regime would be postponed until the return of the refugees had been completed. The Foreign Ministry had previously spoken categorically against this.

While the State duma is not directly involved in the decision-making process regarding peacemaking and peacekeeping policy, it nevertheless exerts influence on Russian policy in the region, reflecting the predominance of the Communists in the duma. Sympathies lie with the Abkhaz, as indicated by several votes ranging from support for Abkhaz accession to the Russian Federation to the normalization of the border and customs situation on the Russian border with Abkhazia. Together with North Caucasian empathy for Abkhazia this acts as a constraint on Russian policy in the region.

Attempts have been made to facilitate top level meetings between the conflicting parties on the assumption that this is the best way to hammer out a deal. Such a meeting, brokered by the intensive shuttle diplomacy of Russian Foreign Minister Evgenii Primakov, took place in August 1997 in Tbilisi between Shevardnadze and Ardzinba. Although this helped the negotiation process move to a new phase, contributing to the development of the UN-sponsored Geneva Process in which the parties could meet more regularly than before, it could not change the basic parameters and underlying problems of the negotiations. After the May 1998 fighting, Russian mediators again worked to promote a meeting between Shevardnadze and Ardzinba, the fourth since September 1992. But this meeting has not happened and anticipation of the meeting unrealistically raised expectations, despite the failure of previous meetings between the two to make substantial inroads in the fundamental divisions.



## Russia and the CIS in the negotiations

Within the CIS there have been accusations that Russia uses this body as a tool for its own policy. However, since becoming a member of the CIS, Georgia has been able to use Heads of State Summit Meetings to its own ends. Trade restrictions on Abkhazia are imposed through the CIS, although Russia has been responsible for their implementation. Until summer 1999, when Georgian coastguards took over, Russia also patrolled Abkhazia's Black Sea coast where Russian and Abkhaz vessels have even exchanged fire. Furthermore, Georgia uses these summits as a forum to voice concerns about the conduct of Russian and CIS policy, stating that CIS resolutions on peacekeeping or on the return of refugees are good but never adequately implemented.

The personality factor is important in Russian diplomacy. Boris Berezovsky's involvement in the Russian Security Council and as Executive Secretary of the CIS represented Russia's attempt to strengthen its political role by means of economic levers. Berezovsky's period as Executive Secretary (April 1998 to March 1999) was characterized by a lack of co-ordination if not competition between the CIS Executive and the Russian Foreign Ministry, leading to criticism in the Russian duma, where a commission on the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict was established in autumn 1998.

## Prospects

Efforts undertaken by Russia on its own, as well as in co-operation with the CIS and UN since 1994, have resulted in the disengagement of the parties and the maintenance of the security and restricted weapons zones. However, the failure to achieve a real political breakthrough has encouraged both sides to seek other solutions which the events of May 1998 confirm. It also led to criticism of Russia's dual role as peacekeeper and mediator which was used to good effect in stabilizing the conflict, but as time goes by and with resolution no closer it has started to produce contradictions. Georgia and Abkhazia hold diametrically opposed views on the political significance of peacekeeping. Georgia seeks to use it to impel Abkhazia to accept the restoration of Georgian territorial integrity, the return of refugees and the reinstatement of the government bodies loyal to Tbilisi. Russian peacekeeping is therefore considered an impediment to effective Russian mediation. For Abkhazia, on the contrary, the preservation of the CISPKF ensures equality in the negotiation process and prevents the renewed use of force – hence Russian peacekeeping is considered a prerequisite for effective mediation.

Russia has failed to find a balance between its peacemaking roles. The Russian Foreign Ministry notified Georgia in June 1998 that if acts of terrorism against the CISPKF continue, its presence would be reviewed. In raising the stakes Russia is seeking strategically to balance its roles and tactically to use the threat of disengagement to exert pressure on the conflicting parties. This position assumes that Georgia's call for the removal of the CISPKF is an attempt to internationalize the peacekeeping rather than reflecting a desire to create a security vacuum and likely explosion of violence that would accompany the removal of the CISPKF.

In political terms, given the mutual unacceptability of the parties' proposals on the future status of Abkhazia, there is little chance of a comprehensive settlement in the near future. Even progress on the return of refugees is problematic since ultimately it is tied to solving the question of political status. The return of the IDPs, which both Georgia and the international community see as a prerequisite to broader progress in the negotiations, would require the maintenance of Russian forces as peacekeepers and probably the enlargement of their mandate as well as more active participation of other CIS states. Any alternative move, including a UN decision to launch a peace enforcement operation, would risk upsetting the fragile status quo and escalating the conflict once more since it is not acceptable to both sides. It is highly unlikely that Russia would countenance such a development, since it believes this would weaken its position in the Caucasus and extend the area of conflict and instability towards the Russian republics of the North Caucasus. Stability is currently problematic in this region as highlighted by the possibility of renewed war in Chechnya, fighting in Dagestan and political tensions in Karachaevo-Cherkessia.

However, Russia's CIS partners show little desire or capacity to be directly and progressively involved in peacekeeping in Abkhazia. Greater CIS responsibility would increase Russia's dependence on its CIS partners and weaken Russian influence in CIS member states' internal politics. Ukraine's preparedness to deploy peacekeepers outside the CIS framework can be seen as an attempt to put pressure on Russia rather than a real desire to engage in peacekeeping.

It is unlikely that there will be significant changes in the Russian role in the foreseeable future. Despite the criticisms levelled by the conflicting parties, Russia believes it must maintain its presence on the ground



**Russian troops at the Gumista, 1993**

and increase its mediating activities, and the international community has shown no indication that it might be prepared to play a more active role. If it did this could become a source of real tension with Russia. At the same time Russia might have to pay more attention to how its relations with Georgia are developing. There has been a considerable rise in tension in 1999, most clearly indicated by Georgia's withdrawal from the CIS Collective Security Agreement.

Normalizing these relations will continue to be difficult as long as the conflict over Abkhazia remains unresolved. Russia possesses both political leverage and operational capabilities that need to be optimized. After Chechnya it is no longer the case, if it ever was so, that Russia can rein in Abkhazia in order to impose a solution. Instead Russia needs to use its potential as a mediator to promote progress, however slow, in settling the conflict. A constructive role could succeed in reducing the impact of the criticism directed at it with regard to other aspects of its strategy, particularly at the development of its partnership with Georgia, the strengthening of the CIS and ensuring its dominant role in this body.



Source: *Journal of European Public Policy*, 1998, 5, 2