

GEORGIA AS GEOPOLITICAL HOSTAGE



Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine more than two years ago launched a bloody war with military operations and casualties on a scale not seen in Europe since World War II. The European, and indeed the global, security order has been demolished as a result, with smaller and weaker nations now feeling the threat of a return to medieval power politics. These processes have reverberated throughout different parts of the world, but the nations that are the most vulnerable to them, and threatened by them, are naturally Russia's immediate neighbors.

Take Georgia, for instance. The Caucasus country was the first nation to experience a full scale

Russian military invasion back in 2008. That invasion followed decades of the Kremlin fueling separatist conflicts during the Soviet era, and subsequently proxy wars in the early 1990s.

Moreover, the 2008 conflict proved to be the start of a new Russian strategy of attrition directed at eroding Tbilisi's independence. After its invasion, Russia left behind a total of 10,000 military personnel in two regions: Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (better known internationally as South Ossetia). After the ethnic cleansing of the Georgian population in the majority of both, Russia recognized them as "independent" states – a recognition that has been shared by only four other countries in the world: Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru and Syria. The reality on the ground, however, is that Russian military units in these regions are serving as occupation forces, and defining the direction of local policies (including the treatment of their remaining Georgian populations).

So the situation remains. Common sense might suggest that, given its heavy military losses in Ukraine, as well as its other domestic and international problems, Russia's grip on power in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia would weaken. But that has not been the case.

Abkhazia in particular has remained an area of keen focus for Russia, and for good reason. The region has access to the sea, beautiful nature for resorts, and solid agricultural potential for the production of a variety of foodstuffs. It also boasts a multi-ethnic population (according to official sources, the region has 244,000 residents, about half of whom are Abkhaz). This provides Moscow with an important lever; Russia has fueled Abkhaz separatism for more than a century, and successfully insinuated its security agencies and military forces into governing structures there. Thus, even before its invasion of Ukraine, Russia had tight security control over Abkhazia and allowed only limited

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space for decision-making by the local de facto government. And after the start of the current war, Russia made major steps toward the economic integration of Abkhazia – a goal articulated officially in Russia’s 2023 Foreign Policy Concept.

In keeping with this objective, Russian forces and their local collaborators have stepped up their violations of human rights of the remaining Georgian population of Abkhazia. These include lengthy illegal detentions, kidnappings and the occasional killing of ethnic Georgians; the detention of young Georgian women on trumped-up charges; the lengthy closures of crossing points, and general restrictions on the freedom of movement. At the same time, the Georgian language has been completely rooted out from schools and kindergartens in the region in favor of Russian.

Most recently, Russia has mapped out a plan to increase its military presence in the region through the development of a permanent Russian naval base near the Black Sea town of Ochamchire. This is very much related to the Ukraine war, because successful Ukrainian drone attacks have forced Russia to move its ships away from Ukrainian territory to stations

further afield – including, potentially, Ochamchire. If the base does end up being used in the context of the Ukraine war, the implications for the country could be grave.

What might Moscow’s endgame be? To be sure, the Kremlin is now preliminarily preoccupied with military operations in Ukraine. At the same time, however, it is intensifying its grip on territories it controls through proxy forces and capabilities that would enable it to pressure its neighbors when the moment is right. The ultimate goal seems to be to recreate a Russia-dominated “Union” state that at least some, if not all, of the former Soviet republics will be forced to join.

This represents a threat to Georgia. The country’s prevailing strategy for NATO integration has paid significant dividends, helping it to improve its own military capabilities, as well as its compatibility with allies. Georgia has been named by the bloc as an aspirant country, and one of its closest non-member allies, providing a sizable contribution to the NATO mission in Afghanistan for more than decade. But without membership, all this falls short of giving Tbilisi lasting security guarantees, leaving it vulnerable to an aggressive neighbor with superior military, demographic and economic power.

In the absence of strong security assurances from the West, Georgia’s options are severely limited. The smartest idea seems to be to focus on two complementary strategies. Militarily, the country needs to enhance its military and continue the development of territorial defense capabilities in partnership with traditional allies like the U.S., Turkey and others. It must also widen the geography of its military-security cooperation to include countries like South Korea, Japan, India, and more.

Economically, meanwhile, Georgian security requires meaningful cooperation on the development of regional infrastructure and on the enhancement of energy and trade connectivity between Europe, the Black Sea and the Caspian. Doing so would increase the country’s attractiveness and importance as an energy, commodity and container transit hub – not to mention a reliable trade partner – for numerous global actors.

To be sure, none of these options will create ironclad security guarantees for Georgia. For the moment, however, they are the only tangible options available to Tbilisi.



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