

WebMemo



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U.S. Should Ensure That Georgia's Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity Are Not Undermined by the United Nations

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As Russia slowly begins to withdraw its troops from Georgia, attention now moves to the question of Russia's future presence in Georgia and in the secessionist Georgian territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia rejected a French-drafted U.N. Security Council (UNSC) resolution calling on Moscow to return to its pre-war position of August 6. Russia followed this rejection by offering its own resolution that permitted it to maintain a military presence—in the form of 2,500 Russian “peace-keeping” troops in “buffer zones” around Abkhazia and South Ossetia—on Georgian soil indefinitely.

Although Moscow did not comply with the original ceasefire negotiated by French President Nicholas Sarkozy, this draft resolution represents at the least a violation of the spirit of the agreement. Russia has clearly indicated that it does not respect the territorial integrity of Georgia.¹ As diplomatic efforts intensify at the United Nations (U.N.) to resolve this international conflict, the United States must unambiguously define its redlines and veto any proposed resolution that does not explicitly uphold Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The Ceasefire Agreement: Part of the Problem, Not the Solution. During an August trip to Tbilisi and Moscow, Sarkozy negotiated a ceasefire agreement in which Russia agreed to withdraw its troops from Georgia by August 18. Having missed two deadlines for withdrawal and destroying Georgian infrastructure in the interim, Russia now appears to be pulling back. However, under the vague terms of

the ceasefire, Russia has announced that it intends to keep 2,500 heavily armed soldiers on sovereign Georgian territory beyond the administrative borders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia for an unspecified amount of time. It has also constructed checkpoints inside Georgia as part of the additional security measures it deems appropriate under the terms of the ceasefire agreement. Furthermore, Russia is now effectively blocking and restricting Georgia's key transportation routes.²

By permitting these actions, the ceasefire—rather than helping resolve the crisis in Georgia—has unintentionally contributed to the problem. Tbilisi signed the ceasefire agreement under international pressure and assurances by Sarkozy that an eventual peace agreement would ensure a Russian retreat to at least its pre-war position. However, Moscow has applied its own interpretation of the ceasefire agreement and continues to argue in the UNSC that the terms of the agreement grants it authority to maintain a permanent military presence in Georgia.

The United Nations. As a permanent member of the UNSC, Russia has the ability to veto council resolutions. Russia has made it abundantly clear that it

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will use its veto to block any resolution that would undermine its interpretation of the ceasefire agreement, force it to withdraw from Georgian territory, or contain any provision objectionable to Russia. France, Britain, and the United States must not be tempted into agreeing to a UNSC resolution simply to say that they have “done something” about the issue. Russia’s demonstrated willingness to take full advantage of its veto ensures that such an effort will lead to circuitous negotiations that will result in a progressively weaker resolution.

Moreover, the U.S. should resist French entreaties to co-sponsor a resolution, which would likely lead the U.S. to focus on getting a resolution passed rather than focus on ensuring that whatever resolution passes is in the interests of the U.S. and Georgia. Instead, while it is awaiting France’s counterproposal to Russia’s unacceptable draft resolution in the UNSC, the U.S. should publicly announce it will veto any resolution that fails to meet the three following redlines:

1. The territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia must be affirmed;
2. Russia must be required to immediately withdraw all of its military personnel in Georgia proper to their status quo ante positions; and
3. Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia and Abkhazia are replaced with OSCE, EU or U.N. peacekeepers (excluding both Russian and Georgian citizens) within a stipulated timeframe.

Such a public statement would clearly convey the U.S. position to the Russians, the Europeans, and the Georgians. It would also provide a helpful counterbalance to the Russians in the UNSC that could aid the French in their negotiations.

Nonetheless, it is highly likely that Russia will refuse these conditions and veto such a resolution. Such an outcome, however, should not be viewed as a failure of the U.S. position. The above-cited redlines are entirely reasonable, and Russia will be

hard-pressed to explain its opposition to a U.N. resolution affirming the territorial integrity of a U.N. member state (it has previously accepted Georgia’s territorial integrity in past resolutions on Georgia) or the sensible request that parties to a conflict not supply personnel to a peacekeeping operation designed to serve as a buffer between combatants.

Russia successfully manipulated Europe’s efforts to resolve this conflict and can not be allowed to set the agenda in the U.N. The U.S. can bolster France’s effort—and France’s resolve now that Paris has taken the lead role in reconciling the conflict—to draft a counter proposal by clearly stating the terms for its support of a U.N. Security Council resolution.

Preconditions for U.S. Support of a U.N. Resolution. A Russian “peacekeeping” presence beyond Abkhazia and South Ossetia is immoral, illegal, and a reward to an aggressor. Moreover, Russians can no longer play an impartial and independent role as a peacekeeper in either South Ossetia or Abkhazia. These two factors must be the foremost preconditions for U.S. support for a UNSC resolution.

While Russia is in a strong position militarily in Georgia, it is in a far weaker position internationally. Russia is the clear aggressor and is seeking to use the UNSC to legitimize its actions and ongoing presence in Georgia. The U.S. must not let them succeed in that effort. The U.S. must remind Russia that it too is a veto-wielding member of the UNSC and that it is equally unafraid to use it. By setting clear redlines on the resolution, the U.S. would help maintain the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia and impede Russia’s effort to use the U.N. to excuse its actions.

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1. “Russia Says Withdrawal Complete,” BBC News, August 22, 2008, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7576556.stm> (August 22, 2008).
2. Tony Halpin, “Russian Troops in Partial Pullout Keeping Checkpoints Within Georgia,” *The Times*, August 22, 2008, at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article4589586.ece> (August 22, 2008).