

COMMENTARY

Georgia—Why We Should Be Watching

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Buried on page A8 of the June 16 *Washington Post* was a short article entitled “Russia Vetoes Georgia Monitors.” The article briefly outlined Russia’s veto of an extension of the 15-year-old mission of United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG), which had been monitoring the situation in the breakaway region of Abkhazia. Coming close on the heels of Russia’s rejection of an extension of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s (OSCE) observer mission in Georgia’s other breakaway region of South Ossetia, Russia’s veto of UNOMIG’s presence in Georgia must be seen for what it is: an attempt to legitimize its recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but more ominously, an attempt to eject all foreign presence—and therefore foreign eyes—from Georgia’s conflict regions. True, there is still a European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia, but it has been denied access to the conflict regions and must be content with monitoring the Georgian side of the conflict line. It would be a relatively simple matter for Russia to manufacture enough instability along the conflict line to chase the EUMM back to Tbilisi. This would leave the borders of the contested zones completely unobserved by members of the international community, making it all too simple for Russia to manufacture a “provocation by the Georgian side” to which it is “compelled” to respond, the same way it was “compelled” to “force Georgia to peace” last August. A resumption of Russia’s war in Georgia, which would be a disaster for the United States and Europe, is not out of the question.

Despite its placement in the *Post* and other newspapers, the Russian ejection of the UNOMIG monitors matters. First, Russia’s behavior in Georgia serves as a useful barometer of its intentions elsewhere in Eurasia and also of how it perceives the U.S. attempt to “reset” Russia-U.S. relations. Russia remains in serious violation of the cease-fire accord brokered by French president Nicolas Sarkozy—it has far more troops inside Georgia’s disputed regions than it did before the war, it is building military infrastructure there, and it is occupying areas of Georgia that were not in dispute prior to the war. If this situation persists, and if Russia fails to reverse its decision to eject UNOMIG and OSCE observers from Georgia, one can reasonably assume that the Russian leadership views our attempts to “reset” as a window of strategic opportunity—a time in which Russia should try to maximize its gain while giving nothing as it waits for the inevitable disillusionment to set in among the new U.S. administration and the U.S.-Russian relationship to return to a transactional nature devoid of any true cooperation. This opportunism combined with intransigence is a tried and true method in Russian foreign policy, and early indications from Georgia (and Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, and elsewhere) indicate that little has changed in Moscow, reset or no reset on this side of the Atlantic.

What is happening in Georgia is also important in that it serves as a barometer of European behavior and intentions in this part of the world. Given the political capital that the European Union gained through its mediation of the Russia-Georgia conflict and its brokering of the resulting cease-fire, one would think that European leaders—and President Sarkozy in particular—would react strongly to seeing that political capital eroded through Russia’s continued violation of the cease-fire accord and its rejection of international attempts to mediate Georgia’s still-smoldering secessionist crises. But the reaction from Brussels and Paris has been curiously muted. The European Union—a grand experiment in shared sovereignty, soft power, and the primacy of international law over pursuit of national goals—seems paralyzed when confronted with a power in its region so openly committed to nineteenth century aims and methods. Russia increasingly ignores the European Union, believing that it has only the United States to reckon with as it pursues its interests in Europe’s backyard. This is in the interest of neither the European Union nor the United States; after all, the concept of a Euro-Atlantic community of values would lose significant currency if only one side of the Atlantic possessed the will and the capability to defend those values when they are challenged.

Georgia's secessionist conflicts are not the only things in the country that bear watching. For the past two months, a domestic political crisis has been playing out, with groups in opposition to the government of President Mikhail Saakashvili demonstrating in the streets of Tbilisi, accusing Saakashvili of leading the country into an avoidable catastrophe in the war with Russia and of rolling back civil and political liberties. Georgia's post-Soviet politics have all too often been a life and death struggle, with the losing side denouncing every election as stolen—often with little evidence to back up these claims—and the government accusing opposition groups of acting on behalf of Moscow, also often with little evidence to suggest this is the case. But two things make this political crisis different from its predecessors in post-Soviet Georgia. First, the Georgian government has acted with restraint—some would argue with an overabundance of restraint—keeping police and security forces away from the demonstrations, with the result that entire areas of Tbilisi were almost shut down to normal traffic and commerce for weeks. Second, there appears to be a fissure opening in the opposition ranks, with more moderate figures like Irakli Alasania moving away from the demand that Saakashvili resign as a first step toward reform of the political system.

This all or nothing tactic was doomed to fail from the start; Saakashvili was reelected in January 2008, and absent a groundswell of public opinion demanding his resignation, something the opposition has been demonstrably unable to muster, there is no political or legal reason for him to leave office. But Alasania's change of tack might be the first step in the formation of a viable Georgian political culture. What Georgia needs is a loyal opposition willing to oppose the government from inside the walls of the parliament, not from the streets. Some of the opposition's criticisms, especially those relating to the curtailment of political and civil liberties, resonate with many Georgians. But as long as those criticisms are shouted from the barricades instead of argued from inside the parliament, there is little chance of meaningful reform or of an eventual peaceful handover of power. It remains to be seen how Georgia's political crisis will end, but if it results in early parliamentary elections and a rebalanced parliament with opposition parties taking their seats instead of taking to the streets, Georgia will be much better off.

Finally, there are a couple of very pragmatic reasons for the United States to be watching what happens in Georgia this summer. The first of these is that Georgia, by virtue of its geographic location, matters to both the United States and to Europe. For the United States, Georgia, along with Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, represents an alternative resupply corridor for Afghanistan. With U.S. supply lines through Pakistan threatened by instability there and the U.S. base in Kyrgyzstan closing in no small part due to Russian pressure on the Kyrgyz government, the United States needs to secure alternative air, rail, and sea corridors into Afghanistan to ensure that it can sustain the mission there, and Georgia is critical to all three of these corridors. For Europe, Georgia represents part of an alternative corridor for Caspian and possibly Central Asian oil and gas deliveries. Such a corridor would go a long way toward lessening Europe's reliance on Russia for its energy needs, and that would be a good thing in both economic and political terms, especially given Moscow's tendency to use its energy resources to pursue political objectives.

So it promises to be a simmering summer in the Caucasus. Russian attempts to eject foreign observers from Georgia cannot be allowed to succeed—the threat to the tenuous peace there would simply be too great. As the United States attempts to deal with Russia's intransigence in Georgia, it would do well to monitor both the Russian and the European reactions and ask itself what these mean for future U.S. policy in the region and beyond. The United States should also pay attention to how Georgia's domestic political crisis plays out, since its end game could profoundly affect the future of Georgia's democratic development. In this case, the crisis and its resolution could present an opportunity for Georgia to establish a stable political culture, an objective worthy of U.S. support. Finally, the United States should pursue its legitimate security and energy interests in the region, interests in which Georgia plays an important part.

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