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Georgia: Examining Possible Sovereign Futures and the Internationalization Option

Submitted by Anonymous on September 11, 2008 - 7:00pm

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At a recent special panel on the Georgian crisis convened at the Bled Strategic Forum, European foreign ministers and representatives of international organizations lamented that they had failed to adequately engage Georgia's unresolved or "frozen conflicts." Since the early 1990s, the international community effectively ignored the disputes between Tbilisi and Abkhazia and South Ossetia, allowing tensions to fester until in early August the disputes escalated into a six-day war between Georgia and Russia. Russia's subsequent recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia independence has legally challenged Georgia's very territorial integrity and sovereign boundaries.

While much of the West struggles to enforce a precarious ceasefire and formulate a common response to Russia's actions, it is worth considering the exact sovereign forms that might govern Georgia in the near future. Three options - indefinite occupation, formal partition or international administration - are possible; though all three pose risks, the internationalization option, the least discussed thus far, may offer the best blueprint for stabilizing the region and eventually resolving status issues.

Under the first and most likely scenario, Abkhazia and South Ossetia will remain recognized by Russia and a handful of other countries, such as Nicaragua, that wish to curry favor with Moscow. We could refer to this as the "Cyprus model." [For background see the [Eurasia Insight archive](#) ^[4]]. Under this arrangement, Russia ensures the dependency of the breakaway territories by stationing a permanent military contingent and keeping the de facto governments isolated from Georgia. In the case of Cyprus, the Turkish military intervention of 1974 was followed by a relatively stable three decades, during which a sizable contingent of Turkish troops was stationed in the self-proclaimed Turkish Northern Republic of Cyprus (TRNC). During this time the sequestered TRNC languished, while the Greek-Cypriot part of the island developed rapidly, culminating in its admission to the European Union 30 years later. [For background see the [Eurasia Insight archive](#) ^[5]].

The Cyprus model is less likely to stabilize Georgia. Unlike Cyprus or Northern Ireland, Georgia and the breakaway territories have no realistic hope of being absorbed by the European Union. Tbilisi has made restoring Georgia's territorial integrity politically paramount and, even after its military defeat, is already being supported anew by inflows of US economic and military assistance. [For background see the [Eurasia Insight archive](#) ^[6]]. The risk of a renewed military clash between Georgia and the breakaway territories will loom large as long as the United States and Russia actively supports each side.

Perpetual unrecognized status also would have destructive economic consequences. Unable to forge "normal" economic ties with the world due to an international embargo, Abkhazia and South Ossetia would be forced to depend exclusively on Russian aid packages and fiscal transfers. Without official aid from

international economic institutions, the de facto authorities and their security services would be forced to operate within the illicit economy and would exploit their unregulated legal status to engage in smuggling, trafficking and money laundering.

A second, though less likely sovereign possibility, is that Georgia itself will be formally partitioned. Under what some have advocated as a "grand compromise" between Russia and the West, a pro-Western Georgia would be admitted to NATO, but its territory would be curtailed as the breakaway territories would be severed and either formally annexed to the Russian Federation (more likely in the Ossetian case) or recognized internationally as independent.

Although, such an arrangement could "normalize" the status and behavior of the territories, partition would set an unacceptably dangerous international precedent, one considerably more destabilizing than the so-called "Kosovo precedent." Regional powers would retain the right to intervene militarily in neighboring states under a type of ethnically based justification that the international community explicitly rejected during the Balkan Wars. A legally partitioned Georgia would also dramatically heighten the insecurity of other post-Soviet territories with large numbers ethnic Russians, especially Ukraine, Moldova and Kazakhstan.

A third option would be to internationalize the status of the breakaway territories altogether and place them under international trusteeship and administration. With authorization from the United Nations, the international community - as it did in the post conflict settings of Bosnia and Kosovo - could assume supervision of the sovereignty of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. An international peacekeeping force would guarantee security, one that would include a sizable contingent of Russian peacekeepers, but who would be placed under an international command structure. International peacekeepers could be supplemented by an external civilian police force that would coordinate with the activities of the de facto security services under OSCE auspices.

As they did in East Timor and Kosovo, UN civilian advisors would work with de facto authorities and their respective ministries to bring administrative capacity and practices up to international democratic standards. An international body could monitor the orderly return of internally displaced persons to certain areas and begin a process of property claims and restitution. The move to final status negotiations would be deferred until international monitors were satisfied that governance had been brought in line with international standards.

International administration would also economically connect for the first time the breakaway territories to the international economy and its institutions. Abkhazia and South Ossetia could be offered valuable trade deals and would become eligible for reconstruction funds from the European Union, emergency financing from the International Monetary Fund and development aid from the World Bank. Increased economic ties with Georgia would help forge links and business interests between the communities.

Though not the current first choice option of any of the regional parties involved, an internationalization strategy could yield benefits for all sides. The international community would have a common focal point to channel its engagement and resources, while the de facto governments of the breakaway territories would be offered a chance to finally engage with the international community as if they were independent. The government of Georgia would buy itself a number of years to rebuild trust with authorities in Abkhazia and/or South Ossetia before status would be decided. Finally, the Russian Federation, by conceding the territories to international authority, could demonstrate its willingness to play an engaged and constructive role in an internationally sanctioned legal process to stabilize the region. An international presence that guaranteed order and stability would transform the run-up to the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, just miles from the Abkhaz border, from a tense and volatile political dispute, to a pre-Olympic period that showcased Russia's pivotal role in facilitating renewed international engagement with the Caucasus.

Editor's note: Alexander Cooley is Associate Professor of Political Science at Barnard College, Columbia University. He is the co-author (with Hendrik Spruyt) of the forthcoming *Contracting States: Sovereign Transfers in International Politics*, to be published by Princeton University Press in 2009.

Alexander Cooley Georgia Eurasia Insight
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