

No Way to Treat Our Friends: Recasting Recent U.S.–Georgian Relations

The tragic August conflict between Georgia and Russia has initiated a wave of accusations about which side was to blame for the outbreak of full-scale war. The war and its aftermath have ratcheted tensions between the West and Russia, as the international community pressures Moscow to withdraw its troops from Georgian territory and abide by its ceasefire obligations. Russia's reckless decision to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia not only contravenes international law regarding sovereign statehood, but if allowed to stand, would establish the unacceptable precedent that countries can justify military intervention in the territory of a neighbor by invoking the rights of their ethnic citizens. Not surprisingly, Moscow has found little support in the international community for its heavy-handed actions, even among countries friendly to Russia.

Yet, as analysts focus on the Russian-Georgian relationship, the questions of how the United States—Georgia's friend and patron—failed to anticipate the conflict and prevent its escalation need to be addressed. Two unequivocal, but ultimately flawed, principles guided recent U.S. policy towards Georgia. First, the United States supported the Saakashvili government, rather than promoting

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The Washington Quarterly • 32:1 pp. 27–41

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broader Georgian democratic development. Second, the United States backed reuniting Georgia's territorial integrity, rather than acting as an honest broker to resolve the frozen conflicts with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The strong personalized ties that developed between Washington and Tbilisi prevented the United States from using its power and influence to credibly restrain the Saakashvili government from adopting a military solution. U.S. reluctance to encourage Georgia to consider alternative sovereign formulas to resolve the frozen conflicts further

emboldened Georgian hardliners. Over time, the Georgian regime's domestic policies and priorities themselves became official U.S. policies and goals, leading to an unhealthy capture of U.S. foreign policy by Tbilisi.

Looking forward, the United States must continue to offer robust and sustained support to Georgia and its democratic development, but should do so by reversing these demonstrably flawed principles. What policies should the new U.S. administration adopt that would preserve its friendly relations with Georgia, while seeking to resolve the ongoing tensions in South Ossetia and Abkhazia?

Personifying Georgia

The U.S. relationship with Georgia, particularly in the years since the Rose Revolution that brought Mikheil Saakashvili's government to power in 2004, is a critical contextual piece to understand the current conflict between Georgia and Russia. Washington's strong support for Saakashvili's regime influenced the U.S. position toward the frozen conflicts, and subsequently the U.S. response in August 2008.

L'état c'est Misha: Saakashvili's Personal Ties

Saakashvili's government emerged in 2004 out of the ashes of the failed, corrupt regime of his predecessor Eduard Shevardnadze. Under the now dubbed "Rose Revolution," the young and charismatic Georgian president came to power in late 2003 and early 2004 after Shevardnadze's party, the Citizen's Union of Georgia (CUG), tried to steal one too many elections. The CUG's attempts to force fraudulent election results on the Georgian people led to weeks of peaceful demonstrations in Tbilisi, culminating in Shevardnadze's resignation and the election a few weeks later of Saakashvili, who had been the preeminent leader of these protests. Saakashvili and his first prime minister, Zurab Zhvania, even before they both took office were viewed by many in Europe, and even more

people in Washington, as the future of a democratic Georgia. The timing of the Rose Revolution was fortunate for the young English-speaking leaders because their dramatic rise to power and bold commitments to join the West fit in precisely with President George W. Bush's publicly stated goal of promoting democracy around the world. At a time of growing international concerns about the U.S.-led invasion and the state of the reconstruction effort in Iraq, post-revolution Georgia offered a rare and successful model of sudden democratic transformation.

Almost immediately, post-Rose Revolution Georgia began to take on greater significance for the Bush administration than it probably should have. The United States held up Georgia to the world as an example of the fruits of Western democracy promotion efforts and proof that democracy could still spread to hitherto unimagined parts of the world. The Rose Revolution was presented as having made Georgia democratic in a matter of weeks, rather than a high-profile incident in Georgia's complex political development, which would have been more accurate.

The increasing significance of the U.S.–Georgia relationship was reflected in U.S. policy, which quickly moved away from supporting the development of democratic institutions and Georgian civil society to directly supporting the Georgian government. Aid and projects for building diverse political parties, ensuring media freedoms, and nurturing civil society were curtailed while supporting the government's state-building project became a U.S. priority.¹ These developments marked the beginning of the process that essentially transformed the nature of the bilateral relationship from between two states to between two regimes.

The regime-to-regime relationship also took on a personalized aspect as Saakashvili and Bush built a friendship based around mutual support for their governments, belief in the global spread of democracy and freedom, and a shared policy vision on issues ranging from promoting free market economies to supporting the military effort in Iraq and fighting the global war on terror. Although Georgia was clearly not able to provide financial, or even meaningful political, support to the United States in Iraq, the Bush administration appreciated Georgia's willingness to continue to send troops after many other countries had left. While the Bush administration was losing international legitimacy and respect, Saakashvili publicly proclaimed that Georgia and the United States shared "common values."² Few countries in the world would have welcomed Bush as warmly as he was in 2005 by Saakashvili and the Georgian

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people. The trip, which featured a long Georgian feast complete with Georgian folk dancing, a speech by Bush to a large and enthusiastic crowd in Tbilisi, and the decision by the Georgian government to rename the main highway from the airport into the center of Tbilisi after Bush, left a personal mark on the relationship between the two regimes.

As the Rose Revolution receded, the early democratic promises of Saakashvili's government seemed increasingly elusive. At the same time, the Bush administration's second term was characterized by failed policies abroad and home. Abroad, the deteriorating situation in Iraq was accompanied with setbacks for democracy in places such as Uzbekistan where the Andijan massacre in 2005 set democracy back substantially, the Palestinian Authority where U.S.-supported elections saw Hamas rise to power, Pakistan where General Pervez Musharraf governed with authoritarian-like powers, and Kenya where violent riots followed a flawed presidential election. At home, the government's disastrous handling of the Hurricane Katrina response and a set of corruption scandals contributed to the electoral defeat for the Republican Party in the midterm elections of 2006. The Bush administration's sinking popularity, both at home and abroad, led the two regimes to develop a relationship of mutual dependency, albeit for different purposes. As the Bush administration attempted to recover from the 2006 electoral defeat, it continued to remain close to Georgia, and promoted Georgia as a great democratic success. Georgia's dependency on the United States during this period was apparent as the small state received a great deal of U.S. financial and military support.

Equally importantly, Washington politically supported the Georgian government even as it became increasingly clear that Georgia was no longer the "beacon of liberty" that Bush had called it in his 2005 speech in Tbilisi.³ The Georgian government knew that while European countries might express concern over reduced media freedom, and elections which grew less free and fair as they grew more competitive, it could always depend on Washington for unequivocal support.

In November 2007, the Tbilisi government declared a state of emergency and staged a violent crackdown on peaceful demonstrations that had been calling for greater democracy and early parliamentary elections in Georgia. But U.S. officials refused to publicly criticize the Georgian government for its heavy handed actions. Furthermore, Georgia's push for NATO membership has strongly been supported by the Bush administration despite negative developments. If there have been any U.S. government criticisms, they have been made

privately. Publicly, Georgian officials visiting Washington have been warmly greeted and given broad access to administration officials and Congress. Support for Georgia's membership in NATO has been unequivocal in the United States even as western European allies raise many questions about Georgia's democratic credentials and readiness for NATO. The significance of the warmth from the United States for the Georgian regime, as it became more embattled at home by unmet expectations and domestic critics, should not be understated, especially given the generally pro-U.S. disposition of the Georgian people.

The U.S. was unable to see the deteriorating state of Georgian democracy and politics.

Frozen Thinking about Conflicts

The tenor of the relationship between Georgia and the United States also framed the U.S. approach toward the frozen conflicts during the post-Rose Revolution period. Abkhazia and South Ossetia had, with Russian support, broken away from Georgia in the early 1990s, while a group of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)-authorized Russian peacekeepers had kept the two sides apart since. Officials in both breakaway regions had established de facto governments that relied heavily on security and economic ties with Russia. Previously these regions had been populated by a diverse mix of Georgians and local people, as well as other ethnic groups. After they broke away from Georgia, about 210,000 ethnic Georgians were forced out of South Ossetia and particularly Abkhazia, creating an Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) crisis that is still a major issue in Georgia.

After the Saakashvili government came to power, the United States no longer sought to present itself as anything approaching an honest broker, sensitive to the needs and concerns of the Georgians as well as the people and leaders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Instead of taking an approach to these conflicts oriented on problem solving and reaching compromise solutions, the United States consistently framed the discussion in terms of restoring Georgia's territorial integrity. For example, speaking at a press conference in Tbilisi in the wake of the November 2007 crisis, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary Matt Bryza emphasized that, "All of us now have a commitment to Georgia's territorial integrity. The United States, our colleagues in the Friends' Group—Germany, the United Kingdom, Russia—we're all committed to Georgia's territorial integrity. So, no step should be taken now that in any way questions Georgia's territorial integrity. Georgia has a responsibility to work with the international community and, most importantly, with the Abkhaz, the South Ossetians, to

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resolve those conflicts peacefully. That's happening. Nobody should question our support for Georgia's territorial integrity."⁴ The U.S. stance indicated that U.S. officials saw the conflict only through Tbilisi's eyes, and immediately lost the confidence of Russian leaders as well as the territories themselves, ensuring that no real solutions would ever be reached. Constant rhetorical emphasis on these issues, however, and the perception that the U.S. supported Georgia's position was very helpful to the Saakashvili regime politically.

The U.S. approach to the frozen conflicts has been indirectly, but not unsubstantially, driven by Saakashvili's domestic political needs, rather than by an attempt to bring enduring peace to the region. The notion of Georgia's territorial integrity, while a hope of many Georgians, seemed to ignore the reality that most Georgians themselves viewed South Ossetia, and to a greater extent, Abkhazia, as lost as the twenty-first century began. These regions had not been governed by Tbilisi for 15 years. And Russia had made it clear that they were not going to allow these regions to be absorbed by Georgia, even under a federal formula. Georgians dreamed of the return of the territories, but did not view this as a likely outcome and did not demand their return from the government authorities. The government of Georgia, however, consistently focused on the need to win back the territories. Increasingly, this distracted the attention of both the Georgian government and the people from the more urgent and realistic tasks of governing and rebuilding the country. The government could, and did, often explain away its failures to meet more pressing goals by changing the subject to the need to restore the lost territories. Throughout this classic attempt to use nationalism to deflect attention from its domestic failings, U.S. policy supported and reinforced Tbilisi's political strategy.

U.S. policy also precluded real solutions to the frozen conflicts that might have helped Georgia in the longer term. Ideas such as developing international administration of the regions under UN trusteeship, for example, were never seriously discussed by the United States. Instead, various proposals for a federal relationship between the regions and the central Georgian government were proposed, and unrestricted return of IDPs continued to remain a prerequisite of all proposed solutions. The largely irrelevant example of Ajara—a province populated by ethnic Georgians that had been ruled by an autonomous warlord but had been brought under central control after the Rose Revolution—was often cited as a model by Georgian officials when referring to the frozen territories. Unwavering U.S. support for these politically almost unimaginable

solutions made it easy for Georgia to maintain its hard-line, all-or-nothing position.

Washington's failure to acknowledge, and clarify, a potential affirmative precedent with the recognition of Kosovo's independence in February 2008—Washington insisted that Kosovo was a *sui generis* or unique case without any relevance for other disputed territories—further allowed Moscow to cynically and selectively draw links between Kosovo and Georgia's breakaway territories. U.S. and European officials could have emphasized that Kosovo's final status talks were only begun after years of international administration under a UN mandate and a prolonged process of institutional reforms that were supervised (and continue to be observed) by the international community. No remotely comparable experience characterized the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Yet, after the West's recognition of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, officials in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were empowered to dig in their heels for independence as their only preferred final status with what they now perceived as international justification.

Saakashvili's Aspirations and Blank Checks

The increasingly personalized relationship between Georgian and the U.S. administrations played a significant role in the months leading up to the outbreak of war between Georgia and Russia. Even the events of November 2007—which saw the Georgian government close critical private media outlets and use force to break up peaceful demonstrations in Tbilisi, resulting in over 500 demonstrators being hospitalized—did not affect the U.S. views and position regarding the status of democracy in Georgia. The ensuing January 2008 presidential elections, which fell short of international democratic standards as Saakashvili avoided a second round run-off, also drew no criticism from Washington. The election occurred only days after a state of emergency was lifted, during a time when the major independent television station had been shut down. Saakashvili just exceeded the 50 percent mark in the first round, but there was ample manipulation of the balloting which likely pushed Saakashvili above this threshold. Dieter Boden, the head of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODHIR) election observation mission referred to "crass, negligent and deliberate falsification during the vote counting."⁵

Even more remarkably, U.S. officials remained silent about the seriously flawed May 2008 parliamentary elections, which further consolidated Saakashvili's United National Movement's (UNM) grip on power as the UNM won just over 59 percent of the votes and 119 of 150 parliamentary seats. The final OSCE/ODHIR report on the election found "credible reports" of intimidation

of opposition candidates, irregularities and a lack of transparency in the tabulation process, the improper use of state administrative resources by the UNM, and a lack of balance in media coverage.⁶ In Europe, however, these events continued to change perceptions of the state of democracy in Georgia and to create more sober assessments of its future prospects. For example, on November 29, 2007 the European parliament issued a statement that expressed its “deep concern at recent developments that have taken place in Georgia, with the violent police crackdown on peaceful demonstrations, the closing down of independent media outlets and the declaration of a state of emergency for 15 days as the latest escalations” and reminded the Georgian government that its actions “run counter to Euro-Atlantic values” and that “democracy, human rights and the rule of law are prerequisites for Euro-Atlantic integration.”⁷ Beyond the question of challenging Russia, unfavorable political changes in Georgia were also a major concern behind the lack of western European support for Georgia’s bid to NATO in early 2008. Differences in outlooks also contributed to the varying U.S. and European responses to the August 2008 conflict.

Saakashvili’s Nationalism

A strong relationship with the United States and an embattled administration led by Saakashvili created a strong domestic imperative for military action in Abkhazia or South Ossetia in the summer of 2008. The Georgian government was coming off a six-month period which had seen a government crackdown on street demonstrations, followed by a state of emergency and two elections, held in January and May of 2008. The elections themselves strengthened Saakashvili and UNM’s formal grip on power, though the elections were assessed as being less than democratic by international monitors and even more critically by domestic observers. Even though economic development in Georgia was good overall, the benefits had not yet trickled down to ordinary Georgians, and still came far short of the unrealistic expectations set by the Georgian government. The political support of the administration, therefore, continued to weaken even as its formal power grew.

Tbilisi’s strategy for remaining strong in the face of these unmet expectations and political turmoil was to raise expectations again—this time over the future of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In fairness, eventually restoring Georgian territorial integrity had always been important for most Georgians, but the UNM increased their rhetoric on these issues, particularly during both 2008 election campaigns where they spoke about the IDPs being home by the New Year. The rhetoric not only raised expectations among voters, but it backed the government into a corner as the promise to restore Abkhazia and South Ossetia became the primary way for the Saakashvili government to maintain support

among the Georgian people. Unfortunately for Georgia, this was never going to be an easy task, even as it became an issue of political survival for Saakashvili. UNM's provocative rhetoric may have won another election for Saakashvili, but it put domestic and international political forces—notably Russia's military buildup and creeping annexation of the breakaway territories—onto an irreversible and dangerous course toward each other.

Moscow's troop build-up and formal establishment of relations with the de facto governments in April and May spurred the Georgian government to further contemplate its military options. Much commentary has been spent over the exact sequence of events in early August and determining which country provoked the other and at what exact hour. Certainly, both the Russian and Georgian sides had drawn up comprehensive war plans in the event of a Georgian assault on South Ossetia, which is exactly what materialized after a week of artillery shelling by sides at the beginning of August. Yet, from our perspective, debating whether Tbilisi was justified in responding to the Russian-backed South Ossetian militia provocations misses the broader political context that Georgia entered or was baited into a military conflict that it could not possibly win and did so against the expressed wishes and prior cautions issued by U.S. officials.

Washington's Mixed Signals

Although it is almost certain that the United States did not give the green light to Saakashvili and his ill-chosen military activity on August 7, 2008, and equally likely that the United States warned the Georgian president not to pursue such a course of action, this only tells part of the story. There are numerous unofficial channels through which Washington and Tbilisi communicate. The various current and former government officials, lobbyists, and U.S.–Georgia supporters, many of whom can be seen in Tbilisi on any given day, may have sent a very different message to the Georgian government. The real possibility that this created a background of encouragement, which Georgian leaders heard over official discouragement, should not be overlooked. Having decided to take the extreme step of trying to change the status quo by force, to counter Russia's continuing creeping annexation of the breakaway territories, shows that Tbilisi hardliners must have heard encouraging signals from U.S. sources, whether they came from official channels or not.

Beyond unofficial signals, the nature of the official relationship between the two countries since the 2003 Rose Revolution made it difficult for Washington to restrain its close ally. After more than four years of never publicly criticizing Georgia, even after the crackdown of November 2007, it was unlikely that private official U.S. warnings would dissuade the Georgian government from an action that was viewed as essential to its regime's survival. While these warnings

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may have been crystal clear, it was probably equally clear to the Georgian leadership that there would be no consequences for ignoring them, as there had been no consequences for ignoring private U.S. warnings before.

Throughout this period, U.S. policy toward Georgia was confined by its inability to clearly see the deteriorating state of Georgian democracy and domestic politics, which was moving the country toward a devastating military

confrontation with an aggressive and hostile Russia in a futile attempt to restore Georgian territorial integrity. The tilted U.S. view made it difficult for Washington to act in a manner consistent with its own regional interests. As it continued to see the frozen conflicts through Georgian eyes, the United States never fully understood the extent to which Abkhazia and South Ossetia were unlikely to be brought back into Georgia on Tbilisi's terms. By summer 2008, U.S. policy in the region reflected Georgian interests, not those of the United States.

After the Crisis: Principles for a More Sustainable U.S.–Georgian Relationship

In the aftermath of the Russian–Georgian conflict, U.S. policy toward Georgia must change course. Rather than emphasize personal relationships between the two regimes, the U.S.–Georgian ties need to be institutionalized across a more diversified set of contacts, processes, and actors. Similarly, the United States needs to think about a greater range of creative sovereign solutions to resolve the breakaway conflicts. Absent changes on both dimensions, U.S. officials risk escalating tensions toward another round of devastating conflict.

Depersonalizing the Relationship

The United States should once again emphasize supporting Georgia's democracy as a foreign policy principle in its bilateral relations. Funding to help develop a meaningful multi-party system should be reinstated, while new programs to ensure and monitor the independence of judicial institutions and the media should be expanded and coordinated with other international partners such as the EU and the OSCE. Having emphasized state-building projects such as reforming the bureaucracy, rebuilding infrastructure, and providing technical support to several Georgian ministries for the last four years, U.S. priorities should once again promote democratic development as well.

Support for democracy is not only critical to re-balance the U.S.–Georgia relationship, but is also necessary to bolster Georgia's European ties and

faltering Euro-Atlantic ambitions. Even prior to the conflict, Georgia's group of "New Friends"—European countries that sympathize with Tbilisi's aspirations for Western integration—emphasized that improving the quality of democracy was a prerequisite for advancing its Euro-Atlantic objectives. Having Washington maintain a tougher stance on democracy would not only get Georgia back on a long-term path toward Euro-Atlantic integration, but would also signal to the EU that the United States is serious about encouraging long-term institutional reforms in Georgia, and not merely supporting a client state or a U.S.-friendly regime in Eurasia.

Yet, in the aftermath of the conflict, troubling signs have emerged in Tbilisi that it will seek to further centralize power and squelch political opposition, as it conflates loyalty to the Saakashvili regime with loyalty to the Georgian state. Georgian leaders have warned that Moscow's determination to enact regime change in Tbilisi must be met with a firm domestic response. On August 29, 2008, Saakashvili announced that he would seek parliamentary approval of a U.S.-style "Patriot Act," designed to guard against internal Russian destabilization of his government. Though details of the act are still unclear, democracy advocates rightly fear that such legislation will infringe upon civil liberties and could lead to a national witch hunt of alleged traitors or Russian sympathizers. U.S. officials and the international community must not allow the Georgian regime to violate Georgia's laws or due process in the name of defending national security.

Within this context, U.S. officials must also carefully monitor, specify the precise use, and even condition the disbursement of the astonishing \$1 billion promised to assist Georgia in its post-conflict reconstruction (about \$570 million in fiscal year 2008 with the balance to be appropriated by the next Congress). Having damaged its own credibility by failing to rein in Georgian hardliners prior to the conflict, Washington, less than four weeks after the war started, has seemingly rewarded Georgian officials for their reckless conduct, which caused damage not just to Georgia, but to U.S. regional interests and goals as well. The lack of a clear plan to sequence the disbursements or attach conditions for the aid would be truly remarkable for what will now be the third largest recipient of U.S. assistance in the world (after Israel and Egypt).

At the very least, U.S. officials should lay out clear expectations for the purpose and use of the funds by stating that the aid package is intended for humanitarian and reconstruction purposes, not for support of the Georgian government. Washington should encourage Georgia's private media and civil

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society to monitor the disbursement of these funds and coordinate oversight with other international donors. Absent adequate oversight, the infusion of this aid into this small economy over just two years is likely to encourage the Georgian regime to waste or misappropriate funds to further its own political survival, as happened in other recent recipients of U.S. reconstruction funds such as Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Palestinian Authority. Especially tricky is how Washington will handle the question of how and at what level to re-arm the Georgian military. The immediate and full replenishing of the Georgian armed forces would constitute a classic case of “moral hazard,” or rewarding, rather than punishing, misuse.

A third policy that could further institutionalize Georgia’s contacts with the United States and the West is to grant it a revised NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP), but without a commitment that future membership will necessarily or even likely follow. A Georgian MAP, however, should not be offered immediately, but should be subject to a successful and transparent reconstruction process and Tbilisi’s continued democratic progress over the next couple of years. Such a declaration would exactly reverse the curious and counter-productive declaration made at the April 2008 Bucharest NATO summit, when NATO officials rejected a MAP but stated that Georgia would inevitably join the security organization in the future.⁸ A Georgia with a MAP would be required to take greater steps to improve its democratic governance and oversight of the military. It would also have to increase the transparency of its chains of command, while it integrates certain operational and planning procedures with those of other allies. Further, Georgia’s MAP should be separated from that of Ukraine, thereby allowing the possibility that one of the candidate countries could enter the security organization on its own merits if the other failed to make sufficient progress. As Georgian officials themselves have acknowledged, granting an open-ended MAP will not commit the United States or its NATO allies to the Article V obligations of militarily supporting Georgia in the event of another conflict. Such obligations only apply to full members, not applicants. If Georgian officials chose to deviate from the norms and expectations that come with a MAP, then NATO officials should make it clear that they would not be offered membership.

Managing the Conflicts

In addition to supporting broader democratic development in Georgia, the United States should abandon its non-compromising commitment to maintain Georgia’s territorial integrity. The commitment to this principle enabled Tbilisi to plan for a military operation to reclaim the breakaway regions and rendered the numerous compromise formulas for solving territorial disputes, developed under the supervision and engagement of the United States itself, useless.

Practically, if Tbilisi's proposals for "limitless autonomy" under a federal architecture were unacceptable before the events of August, they are simply off the table now for the immediate future for the de facto governments of these regions. Maintaining a call to "solve" the frozen conflicts by simply re-uniting Georgia will not only continue to drive Abkhazian and Ossetian officials to Moscow's arms, but will delay the Georgian public from having to come to terms with the inevitable sovereign compromises that nearly always have characterized the negotiated resolution of modern territorial disputes in places such as the Balkans or Northern Ireland.

The United States should abandon its commitment to maintain Georgia's territorial integrity.

Reversing position on this issue should in no way be taken as support for Moscow's reckless recognition of the independence of the breakaway territories. Rather, the United States and its European partners should steadfastly refuse to recognize the self-declared independence of the breakaway territories, while at the same time support the adoption of an international process that will attempt to resolve status issues without a preconceived endpoint. Showing greater flexibility regarding Georgia's territorial integrity can allow U.S. officials to take a number of constructive steps toward facilitating such a process.

First, U.S. officials could de-link the status of Abkhazia from that of South Ossetia. Though both were previously referred to as "frozen conflicts," the two regions' differing characteristics, size, locations, and administrative capacities will likely necessitate different sovereign formulas for their eventual resolution. South Ossetia's enclave status, small population, and complete dependence on Russia through the Roki tunnel, which cuts through the towering Caucasus mountains and allows Russia to bring supplies to South Ossetia, renders it an unviable sovereign polity. South Ossetia's absorption and annexation into the Russian Federation and/or Northern Ossetia appear all but inevitable.

Accordingly, U.S. officials should encourage Georgian negotiators to obtain a series of firm security guarantees from Moscow, which could include the deployment of a more robust and international peacekeeping force on the Georgian–Ossetian border. Georgian and Western negotiators should demand that the most recent wave of IDPs—who were ethnically cleansed and driven from their villages by Russian soldiers during this conflict—be allowed to return to their villages and have their security guaranteed by an international peacekeeping mission, even within new administrative boundaries. No doubt, such concessions will be politically painful for Georgia, but Tbilisi will then at least get some gains regarding its overall security out of an already lost situation in South Ossetia.

Abkhazia is a more complicated case, both because it is larger than South Ossetia and because its Black Sea coastline affords it potentially more options for forging regional and international ties—though it is still not ready for sovereign statehood. At a minimum, U.S. officials should now follow a strategy to increase Abkhazia's international ties and autonomy in order to reduce its dependency on Russia, and encourage Tbilisi to pursue the same strategy. Encouraging the adoption of an international process or even UN trusteeship status to deal with status issues could finally drive some daylight between Russia and Abkhazia.

Based on the precedent of the UN missions in East Timor and Kosovo, Abkhazia, in exchange for placing itself under international trusteeship, would gain access to Western economic assistance and loans, forge robust new trade ties with neighbors such as Turkey, and wean itself off of its economic dependency on Russia. The port of Ochamchire could be opened as a regional commerce hub, under international supervision, while the Sukhumi airport could once again be re-opened for international flights. Abkhazia's international access, however, would have to be conditioned upon its continued participation in an internationally-administered status process. Abkhaz officials would be faced with a basic choice: join the international community under international supervision or remain completely isolated and dependent on Russia. Though skeptics may point out that Moscow would be reluctant to cede authority of these regions to a third party, Tbilisi and Washington could, at the very least, use calls for internationalization, with all of its potential benefits for Abkhazia, as a strategy to pry the Abkhazian leadership away from Moscow and ensure more vigorous European engagement.

Normalizing U.S.–Georgian Relations

Over the last four years, U.S.–Georgia relations have been characterized by strong personal ties between the regimes and an unflinching U.S. commitment to maintaining Georgia's territorial integrity. Yet, these ties prevented U.S. officials from credibly restraining Georgia in the face of Russian provocations. They also have heightened international perceptions that the Saakashvili regime, despite its public commitment to democracy, remains a client of Washington that will continue to receive unconditional support from its superpower patron.

To place the U.S.–Georgia relationship on more stable footing and bring greater credibility to U.S. regional policy, the United States should no longer conflate support of Georgian democracy with unconditional support of the Saakashvili government. Georgia's democratic institutions—its political parties, civil society groups, legal branches, and independent media—all require U.S. support, especially now in the wake of a conflict that has encouraged Georgian

authorities to further centralize and consolidate domestic power. U.S. officials should join European partners in adopting a more flexible and creative approach to the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. If the international community is unable to establish a mechanism and timetable for their resolution, these unresolved disputes will continue to fester and encourage aggressive nationalism.

Georgia's unequivocal backers and hardliners will likely respond that such a prescription ignores Moscow's damaging conduct, its unacceptable breach of international law, and occupation of Georgian territory. Yet, none of the proposed recommendations diminishes Russia's culpability for its actions in Georgia, nor releases Moscow from its commitments to abide by the elements of the negotiated peace process to which it has agreed. Nor does rebalancing the U.S.–Georgia relationship as outlined above imply that the United States, along with the transatlantic community, should show any less of a commitment to supporting the embattled Eurasian country and a war-wary Georgian public. Quite the opposite: only by depersonalizing U.S.–Georgian relations can a broader and more sustainable basis be built from which to effectively facilitate Georgia's democratic development and international integration.

Notes

1. Lincoln Mitchell, *Uncertain Revolution* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), Chapter 7.
2. Saakashvili used this phrase as recently as in a speech during Vice President Cheney's trip to Tbilisi in September of 2008. See, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/09/20080904.html>.
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