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The West Should Unite in Support of Georgia

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In the last few days, Moscow has beefed up its “peacekeeping force” in the breakaway Abkhazia on the Black Sea, claiming it is protecting Russian citizens, who are the majority population of Abkhazia. Furthermore, Russian troops are amassing on the de-facto Abkhazia-Georgia border. The Caucasus may be on the brink of a war. At the same time, Russia has accused Georgia of planning to invade Abkhazia, accusations that sound distinctly hollow under the circumstances.

Throughout April, Russia has escalated its political and military pressure on its neighbor Georgia. At the NATO summit in Bucharest, President Vladimir Putin reportedly threatened to recognize the independence of the breakaway autonomous republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia if Georgia was granted a Membership Action Plan (MAP) for eventual accession to NATO. On April 16, despite France and Germany balking at providing a MAP, and apparently as retribution for the West’s recognition of Kosovo’s independence, Putin instructed the Russian Foreign Ministry to upgrade the legal and economic ties between Russia and the secessionist governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, violating Georgian sovereignty.

More recently, on April 20, according to Georgian reports, a Russian MiG-29 fighter shot down an unmanned Georgian aerial reconnaissance vehicle in violation of Georgian airspace. Despite some Russian concessions in its bilateral relations with Tbilisi, Russian hostility toward Georgia does not seem to be abating.

Unity Against Threat. The question that faces Europe and the U.S. is how to stop Russia’s violation of Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. For that, Washington needs to secure Western unity in firm opposition to Russia’s irresponsible policies and actions.

Western allies should recognize that Russia’s bullying behavior against its neighbors is against Moscow’s long-term security interests. A cooperative and rule-abiding Russia already is in part, and may increasingly evolve more completely into, a security and business partner for Europe and the United States. On the other hand, a Russia that reverts to the old imperialist modes of operation is nothing but trouble and a source for security concerns near and far.

America’s European partners, including Germany and France, should take Russia’s expansionist rhetoric and deeds seriously and oppose them vigorously. The West should not allow Russia’s violation of Georgia’s territorial integrity to drive a wedge between the U.S. and its European allies. The U.S. and its European allies should express full diplomatic support to Georgia with regard to its territorial integrity and sovereignty.

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The West should heed Georgia's call to convene emergency meetings at the U.N. Security Council and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to discuss Russia's April 16 decision to expand its ties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The West should persuade Russia to pull out its soldiers from the peacekeeping contingents in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and replace them with U.N. or OSCE-approved peacekeeping forces that could include troops from, for example, Ukraine, Romania, and Poland as its lead contingents.

Sovereignty Threatened. About two weeks after the Bucharest meeting, President Putin instructed his Foreign Ministry to prepare measures to "create mechanisms of comprehensive defense of the rights, freedoms and lawful interests of the Russian citizens living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia." The majority of the Abkhaz and South Ossetians hold Russian passports and participated in the Russian parliamentary and presidential elections.

According to the Russian Foreign Ministry, Putin also ordered the Russian government to work together with the breakaway governments to "organize cooperation in the trade, economic, social and techno-scientific fields and in the spheres of information, culture and education, particularly with the enlistment of Russia's regions."

Putin also ordered the Russian government to recognize the legality of corporate entities registered in these often-lawless regions, and "to cooperate with Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the framework of legal assistance in civil, family and criminal matters." Russian Foreign Ministry consular offices would provide consular services for the enclaves' residents.

Moscow's Frustration. There are at least two reasons for Russia's heavy-handed policies toward Georgia. First, Russian diplomats and analysts have repeatedly declared since at least 2007 that Kosovo's declaration of independence and recognition by the U.S. and the major Western powers would lead to recognition of pro-Russian secessionist regimes, including Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. The second reason is Russia's adamant opposition to the U.S.-supported bid by Georgia to become a NATO member.

A week before the Bucharest summit, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov declared that "it would be a very dangerous game if they [Georgia] secure NATO support and solve conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia by force.... Abkhazia and South Ossetia can't even think about Georgia joining NATO. It's impermissible to play with fire." During the NATO summit in Bucharest, President Putin warned President Bush that if Georgia were offered a MAP, Moscow would establish a buffer zone between Russia and NATO. Putin added that NATO's eastward expansion would be a threat to the interests of Russia, which would be forced to undertake "appropriate counter-measures."

Track Record of Bullying. Georgia was a colonial dependency of the Russian Empire, and later the Soviet Union, since the late 18th century. Even after the USSR collapsed, Moscow continued to bully Tbilisi. In 1992–1993, after Georgia attempted to prevent secession of Abkhazia by force, Russia armed and supported the Abkhaz separatists and deployed Chechen "volunteers" to fight alongside them. The result was the de-facto secession of Abkhazia and the ethnic cleansing of over 300,000 Georgians from their homes. The notorious late Islamist warlord Shamil Basaev, later the military leader of the Chechen rebels, fought in Abkhazia in the early 1990s as a Russian mercenary. Abkhazia has turned into a cigarette-smuggling criminal gang heaven.

In March 2006, the Kremlin slapped economic sanctions on Tbilisi, including restrictions on the importation of Georgian wine, mineral water, fruits, and vegetables. Georgia used to export 90 percent of its wine to Russia. In September 2006, after Georgia briefly arrested four Russian military intelligence officers, the Russian government imposed a ban on entry visas for Georgians, affecting hundreds of thousands who work in Russia and support their families back home. Russia severed all air, rail, and postal communications with Georgia as part of its punishment. In December 2006, the Russian energy giant Gazprom more than doubled the price of natural gas, previously sold to Georgia at a deep discount. And in August 2007, two Russian Su-24 ground attack jets launched a 1,000 kg precision-guided missile near a village 50 miles north of Tbilisi.

This month, however, Putin ordered the lifting of visa restrictions, initiated bilateral talks to discuss the resumption of Georgian exports to Russia, and reopened a border crossing between the two countries. He also ordered commercial passenger flights and postal links reestablished. The relaxation of the visa restrictions and lifting of the trade ban appear designed to soften the impact of Moscow's expansion of ties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

What Should the West Do? Washington should not allow Russian opposition to a NATO MAP for Georgia to become an issue between the U.S. and its European allies. Instead, NATO countries should show unity in the face of a Russian assault on Georgia's territorial integrity. In response to Moscow's heavy-handed policies against Georgia, the U.S. and its European allies should:

- **Denounce** Russian occupation of Abkhazia. US and the European countries should coordinate a diplomatic response, taking Russia's expansionist rhetoric and performance seriously and launch vigorous protests against them.
- **Heed** Georgia's call to convene emergency meetings at the U.N. Security Council and the OSCE to discuss Russia's decision to expand its ties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia and express full support of Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty,

- **Support** Georgia's demand that Russia pull out its Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) "peacekeeping" contingents from the two breakaway regions and replace them with a U.N. and/or OSCE-approved peacekeeping force that could include Ukrainian, Romanian, and Polish peacekeepers.

Conclusion. Russia's behavior toward Georgia should serve as a warning to Europe and the U.S. Georgia may be a new canary in the geopolitical mine of Eastern Europe and Eurasia. The Kremlin is testing Western resolve to stand up to its ambitions in the post-Soviet space. Failure to stop Russian interventionism in Georgia could mean opening the floodgates of border revisions and destabilization masquerading as "defense of Russian citizens" in the CIS. This may be a prescription for escalating conflicts in the East, which Europe, eventually, would not be able to ignore. In turn, the U.S. and Europe could offer Russia incentives if it abandons its attempts to absorb Abkhazia and South Ossetia into the Russian Federation or to recognize their independence.

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