Following significant fighting in summer 2004, the situation in South Ossetia has stabilized somewhat in the past year, and the Joint Peacekeeping Forces (JPKF) have been relatively successful in maintaining a cease-fire. Yet mortar attacks in the latter part of 2005, an unauthorized military parade in the South Ossetian administrative center of Tskhinvali, and a Georgian initiative to change the structure of the Joint Control Commission (JCC) have injected a great degree of uncertainty into the peacekeeping environment.

The active phase of the conflict in South Ossetia lasted from January 1991 to June 1992 and displaced almost 100,000 people. Like many of the conflicts that broke out in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse, the South Ossetian conflict has its roots in Soviet ethnicity policy and the desire for autonomy. In November 1989, with the breakup of the Soviet Union looming and Georgian nationalism on the rise, the South Ossetian regional government sought to upgrade its status from an autonomous region (oblast) to an autonomous republic within Georgia. The Georgian government refused and retaliated with a law abolishing South Ossetia’s status as an oblast in winter 1990. In January 1991 several thousand Georgian troops marched on Tskhinvali, ushering in a year of violent clashes and urban fighting. In May 1992, the deaths of a reported thirty-six South Ossetian civilians, including women and children, threatened to expand the conflict beyond the two parties—that is, to involve the Russian Federation directly.

The severity of the May 1992 incident led to negotiation of the Sochi Agreement, on the settlement of the Ossetian–Georgian conflict (June 1992), and to the establishment of the JPKF, composed of Russian, Georgian, and Ossetian units. The agreement also called for a cease-fire, a demilitarized security zone, the return of refugees and displaced persons, and the commencement of a political process under the auspices of the JCC, made up of Georgian, Russian, and North and South Ossetian representatives, with participation from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The JCC coordinates the activities of the JPKF, whose principal mandate is to separate combatants, prevent a resumption of hostilities, and stem the flow of arms into the region. Although the Georgian government would have liked the JCC and JPKF to compel South Ossetia back under Tbilisi’s control, the South Ossetians were able to establish their own state’s institutions, including a presidency, parliament, cabinet, and national guard.
Violence broke out once again in summer 2004, after newly elected Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili ordered the destruction of the Ergneti Market, notorious for the availability of weapons and illicit drugs, as part of a ramped-up countersmuggling campaign. Saakashvili moved a significant number of Georgian troops into the conflict zone and ordered them to prepare for a "protracted, full-scale war." A tense summer culminated in a series of bloody clashes between Georgian and South Ossetian militias in August that left more than twenty dead. A new cease-fire was signed on 18 August by the JCC cochairs and Georgian prime minister Zurab Zhvania.

The 2004 hostilities strained the already tense relationship between Georgia, South Ossetia, and Russia. It also illuminated the lack of trust that has marked the peacekeeping and diplomacy efforts thus far. Since then, there have been numerous small flare-ups in violence, including a two-week exchange of fire between Georgian and South Ossetian peacekeepers in November 2004, and the kidnapping of four Georgian civilians in June 2005.

There is a marked lack of trust between Georgian and Russian participants in the JPKF and the JCC, and a lack of faith in the peacekeeping arrangement. On 13 September South Ossetia formally expressed concern over the appointment of the new commander of the Georgian peacekeeping forces (because of his role in the summer 2004 campaign). On 20 September the South Ossetian administration staged a military parade in Tskhinvali, raising great concern on the Georgian side about the meaning of demilitarization and demilitarized zones as specified in the Sochi Agreement and the Document on Demilitarization (2004). That night, mortar shells of unidentified origin fell on Tskhinvali, injuring seven civilians.

Simultaneously, the JCC has come under attack for its lack of efficacy and perceived bias. The South Ossetians have demanded an increase in their status on the commission, while Georgia has threatened to leave the JCC altogether, arguing that they cannot possibly have an equal voice in a body composed of Russia, North Ossetia (loyal to the Russian Federation), and South Ossetia. Recent events reveal how difficult it will be to resolve the underlying political issues within the current framework.