

Georgia



dramatically changed the face of peacekeeping in the southern Caucasus. Five days of fighting saw Georgia launch a military offensive on the contested enclave of South Ossetia; Russian forces responded robustly by pushing into and holding Georgian territory; conflict in Georgia's other secessionist region, Abkhazia; and widespread international concern. While the extant peace operations of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), United Nations, and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) were overtaken by the dynamics of the conflict, a European Union-brokered peace agreement made way for the deployment of a new EU monitoring mission. In the aftermath of the confrontation, Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states; only Nicaragua joined Russia in this move. Georgia declared the 1994 Moscow Agreement, which was the basis of the presence of the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) in Abkhazia, null and void. In addition, Georgia severed diplomatic relations with the Russian Federation, provided notification of its decision to terminate the peacekeeping operations of the CIS in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and withdrew from the CIS itself. The situation stabilized in the last months of the year as Russian forces pulled back and the EU's military observers deployed. Meanwhile, in December the OSCE ceased operating in the country when Russia objected to renewing the mission's mandate. At the start of 2009, Georgia's security remains fragile, and the future of international engagement in the country remains uncertain.

UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG)

• Authorization and Start Date	24 August 1993 (UNSC Res. 858)
• SRSG	Johan Verbeke (Belgium)
• Chief Military Observer	Niaz Muhammad Khan Khattak (Pakistan)
• Senior Police Advisor	Oleksiy Telychkin (Ukraine)
• Budget	\$34.1 million (1 July 2008–30 June 2009)
• Strength as of 31 October 2008	Military Observers: 135 Police: 18 International Civilian Staff: 102 Local Civilian Staff: 189 UN Volunteer: 1

For detailed mission information see p. 364

The brief conflict between Georgia and Russia that followed the outbreak of hostilities in South Ossetia on 7–8 August 2008 has

Background

Georgia's internal conflicts date back to the Soviet period, and the subsequent breakup of

the Soviet Union after the end of the Cold War. Violent conflict erupted in the region of South Ossetia in January 1991, after the Georgian government denied a request by Ossetian officials for autonomous status. The war continued until June 1992 and ended with the Agreement on the Principles for Peace Settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian Conflict, between Georgia and Russia, which established both a cease-fire and the Joint Control Commission (JCC). This body, composed of representatives from Georgia, Russia, and North and South Ossetia, was to monitor the terms of the agreement, implement settlement measures, coordinate economic reconstruction, and facilitate the return of displaced persons. It was also tasked with coordinating the efforts of the CIS–South Ossetia Joint Peacekeeping Forces (JPKF), a peacekeeping battalion of 1,500 troops led by Russia.

In December 1992, following the end of fighting in South Ossetia, the OSCE established a mission in Georgia to assist the government in conflict settlement, democratization, human rights protection, and establishment of rule of law. Since its initial deployment, the OSCE’s mandate in Georgia has widened to include confidence building within the Ossetian crisis zone and providing assistance to UNOMIG as the latter oversees the peace process in Abkhazia.

This situation remained stable for more than a decade, while the conflict itself was unresolved. In 2004, the newly elected Georgian president, Mikhail Saakashvili, made restoration of Georgian territorial integrity a priority for his administration. In the context of an antimuggling campaign, Saakashvili closed the Ergneti market outside Tskhinvali and ordered a significant number of Georgian troops to the region’s border. This move spurred renewed violence and threatened to drive the conflict into war. While an August 2004 cease-fire agreement ended the direct military confrontation in South Ossetia in the short term, the conflict zone remained volatile.

Meanwhile, shortly after Georgia gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Abkhazia, a region in the northwest of the country on the Black Sea coast, also sought its

CIS Peacekeeping Force (CISPKF) in Abkhazia-Georgia

- Authorization Date 14 May 1994
- Start Date 21 June 1994
- Force Commander Major-General Sergey Chaban (Russia)
- Strength as of August 2008 Troops: 2,542

CIS–South Ossetia Joint Peacekeeping Forces (JPKF)

- Authorization Date 24 June 1992
- Start Date July 1992
- Force Commander General Marat Kulakhmetov (Russia)
- Strength as of August 2008 Troops: 1,519

OSCE Mission to Georgia

- Authorization Date 6 November 1992
- Start Date December 1992
- Head of Mission Terhi Hakala (Finland)
- Budget \$14.6 million (September 2007–October 2008)
- Strength as of 30 September 2008 Civilian Staff: 62

EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM)

- Authorization Date 15 September 2008
- Start Date 1 October 2008
- Head of Mission Hansjörg Haber (Germany)
- Budget \$35.0 million (September 2008–August 2009)
- Strength as of 1 December 2008 Monitors: 234

separation from Georgia. Fighting broke out in August 1992 after Georgian forces entered the Abkhaz capital, Sukhumi, and continued, despite

three cease-fires brokered by Russia, until September 1993. The United Nations became increasingly involved in diplomatic efforts to secure peace and in August 1993 established UNOMIG to verify compliance with a cease-fire reached the month before. In early 1994, the two sides negotiated a cease-fire and separation of forces agreement, known as the Moscow Agreement, which mandated the presence of a CIS Peacekeeping Force (CISPKF) in Abkhazia. The CISPKF was to promote the safe return of refugees, provide a “security zone,” and supervise implementation of the agreement. In July 1994, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 937, expanding UNOMIG’s mandate to include monitoring of the CISPKF, the cease-fire agreement, and Georgian troop withdrawal from the Kodori Valley in northeastern Abkhazia.

A peacemaking role for the UN Secretary-General and UNOMIG was reinforced from 1997 onward by the engagement of a Group of Friends for the Secretary-General for Georgia (France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States). But negotiations to find a political settlement of the conflict and bring about the return of Georgian refugees to Abkhazia made little progress.

From early 2006 onward, the situation of both breakaway republics became more deeply entwined with broader concerns rooted in deteriorating relations between Georgia and Russia, and the implications of both developments in Kosovo and Georgia’s pursuit of membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The government of Georgia made it clear that it took very seriously the possibility that Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia might depend on the outcome of the debate over the future status of Kosovo. Russia, meanwhile, made its opposition to Georgia’s moves toward membership in NATO equally plain.

Key Developments

The risks inherent in these rising tensions were evident by late 2007 when, concerned by the large number of allegations about military deployment and buildup on both sides of the Georgian-Abkhaz cease-fire line, UN Secretary-General

Ban Ki-moon issued a public statement appealing to both sides to show restraint. As he did so, he supported the call by the UN Security Council (Resolution 1781) to all parties to consider and address seriously each other’s legitimate security concerns, to refrain from any acts of violence and provocation, and to comply fully with previous agreements regarding cease-fires and the nonuse of violence. These warnings proved sadly prescient for 2008, a year in which escalating mistrust and the consequent deterioration of the internal situation took on an increasingly international dimension.

Following Kosovo’s declaration of independence and its recognition by several countries in early 2008, Russia took steps to strengthen its ties to both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. On 6 March 2008, it broke with other CIS member states and lifted economic sanctions that had been in place since 1996, enraging Georgian authorities. Meanwhile, on 6–7 March, South Ossetia and Abkhazia themselves called for international recognition, citing the “Kosovo precedent.” Ties between Russia and Abkhazia and South Ossetia were further enhanced when, on 16 April 2008, outgoing president Vladimir Putin issued an instruction authorizing direct relations between government bodies in Russia and the de facto authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in a number of fields. The Georgian government protested strongly at what it considered a blatant violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Frustrated with the lack of progress on South Ossetia’s status under the JCC negotiating structure, in early 2008 Georgia had suggested altering the format to include the EU, the OSCE, Russia, and both the Georgian and the South Ossetian governments as formal parties to the negotiations. Russia rejected the proposal, prompting Georgia’s withdrawal from the JCC negotiations. In the successive months, the security situation deteriorated, with a series of clashes taking place between the Georgian army and separatist forces.

Events in South Ossetia assumed a new pace and gravity in July 2008 with the shelling of the capital, Tskhinvali, by Georgian forces, following an attack on the Tbilisi-backed head

of the South Ossetian administration (as opposed to the leader of the de facto authorities). Meanwhile, Russian fighter jets were reported to have flown over Georgian airspace in response to claims that Georgia was building up its military forces around South Ossetia in preparation for operations aimed at rescuing captured servicemen. In response, Georgia recalled its ambassador to Moscow for consultations, while the OSCE stepped up its mediation efforts by sending Special Envoy Heikki Talvitie to visit the region.

The situation in Abkhazia followed a similarly difficult trajectory. The Georgian government introduced new proposals to resolve the conflict in late March 2008 and emphasized the need to change the negotiating format. Negotiations, however, remained suspended, as they had since 2006, as a consequence of the Abkhaz insistence on the withdrawal of Georgian forces introduced into the upper Kodori Valley in September 2006 and Georgia's refusal to sign an agreement on the nonresumption of hostilities.

In an increasingly hostile environment accusations and counteraccusations proliferated. Georgia's claim that Russia shot down an unmanned aerial vehicle over Abkhazia was confirmed by a UN report. Meanwhile, UNOMIG reported that Georgia had on several occasions violated the cease-fire by flying fighter jets over the Abkhaz side of the zone of conflict. Incidents of overflight, reportedly by Georgian and Russian aircraft, continued throughout the year. Georgia and Russia responded to such incidents by mobilizing troops. Citing the possibility of an impending deterioration in the security situation, in late April 2008 Russia reinforced the CISPKF with 525 additional troops. A month later it also deployed a controversial military railway unit to rehabilitate Abkhazia's decrepit railway system.

In an effort to assuage the military buildup and escalating rhetoric between Abkhaz and Georgian authorities, Germany, the coordinator of the Group of Friends, proposed a three-phased peace initiative in July, aimed at restoring confidence on both sides. With the peace process far off track, UNOMIG continued to monitor the situation, but the tense environment impeded its



Members of EUMM speak with a Russian soldier as he dismantles a position in Nakreti, some 10km from the Gori checkpoint in Georgia, 6 October 2008.

VANO SHLAMOV/AFP/Getty Images

efforts on the political front. In late July and early August, tensions continued to rise.

The mounting hostility reached a climax on 7 August 2008, when Georgian forces launched rocket attacks on South Ossetia, which independent military observers have deemed both unprovoked and indiscriminate. In response to Georgia's actions, and voicing its need to protect its peacekeepers and citizens in South Ossetia, Russia retaliated robustly, deploying ground troops, fighter jets, and tanks into the separatist territory, repulsing the Georgians and eventually expanding military operations deep into Georgia and along its territorial waters. The conflict quickly expanded beyond South Ossetia and the surrounding region as Russian forces pushed into Georgia's northwest from Abkhazia and Abkhaz forces moved quickly to regain control of the upper Kodori Valley. The fighting lasted a mere five days, but caused hundreds of casualties and the displacement, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), of 30,000 ethnic Ossetians and 85,000 ethnic Georgians, as well as the devastation of the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali, and the destruction of several key Georgian military installations.

Negotiations initiated on 12 August 2008 by the French presidency of the European Union yielded a six-point cease-fire and peace agreement. Among other things, this called for the withdrawal of Russian and Georgian forces to their positions prior to the hostilities and the opening of international discussion on the modalities of security and stability in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the successive weeks, Russian forces began to withdraw from undisputed Georgian territory. Yet it was evident that there could be no return to the status quo ante. The CISPKF had effectively ceased to exist once the conflict began. After it ended, Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, and a unanimous resolution by the Georgian parliament declaring Abkhazia and South Ossetia as territories occupied by the Russian Federation and the Russian peacekeepers, only underlined the depth of the transformation that had taken place.

Changes in the other peacekeeping structures in Georgia were quickly initiated but will take some time to be completed. The OSCE added another 100 observers to its personnel already in place in Georgia. This reinforcement proved temporary, however, as the OSCE was forced to cease its operation at the end of the year when Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia divided the organization and blocked the renewal of the mission's mandate. The European Union deployed the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM) in September 2008 and began operations on 1 October. Its more than 200 monitors observe the stabilization process, centering on full compliance with the six-point agreement, the normalization process of civil governance, and the return of displaced persons, and contribute to reduce tensions through facilitating contacts between parties and undertaking other confidence-building measures. The mission established four field offices, in Poti, Zugdidi, Gori, and Tbilisi, and deployed patrols to the areas adjacent to Abkhazia and South Ossetia—not within them. On 10 October the EU confirmed that Russian armed forces had completed their planned withdrawal from these areas to Abkhazia and Georgia.

Meanwhile, by year's end the consequences for the United Nations in Georgia still remained unclear. During the August 2008 hostilities, its role was limited by the restriction of UNOMIG's mandate to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. In early September, elaborations on the six-point plan of 12 August reaffirmed that UNOMIG would continue to carry out its mandate at the same personnel levels and deployment pattern as had existed on 7 August, subject to possible future adjustments decided on by the Security Council. In the dramatically changed context within which UNOMIG found itself operating, the impact on its operations was not yet known. It was unclear, for example, which elements, if any, of the 1994 Moscow Agreement, which had formed the basis of its observation mandate, would be retained, or what arrangement would assume a role in the separation of forces between the two sides hitherto performed by the CISPKF.

When the Security Council met in mid-October 2008, it was consequently unsurprising that it decided to extend UNOMIG's mandate for four months, pending greater clarity in the situation on the ground.

Conclusion

The dramatic events of August 2008 represented an extraordinary setback to peace operations in Georgia, but also had a geopolitical impact that struck far beyond the relatively small theater of Georgia's separatist conflicts. That the severity of the conflict, when it burst into the open, came as a surprise to many, is undeniable. But it also followed a long period of serious deterioration in relations between the parties involved, rooted in a growing skepticism regarding the possibilities of reaching negotiated settlements. By the end of 2008, with the dust still settling from the August hostilities, it was still too soon to identify a clear path forward. However, the prompt dispatch of the new European Union mission offers a clear demonstration of the importance attached to peace and security in a region whose potential for instability, as 2008 demonstrated, is unwise to underestimate.