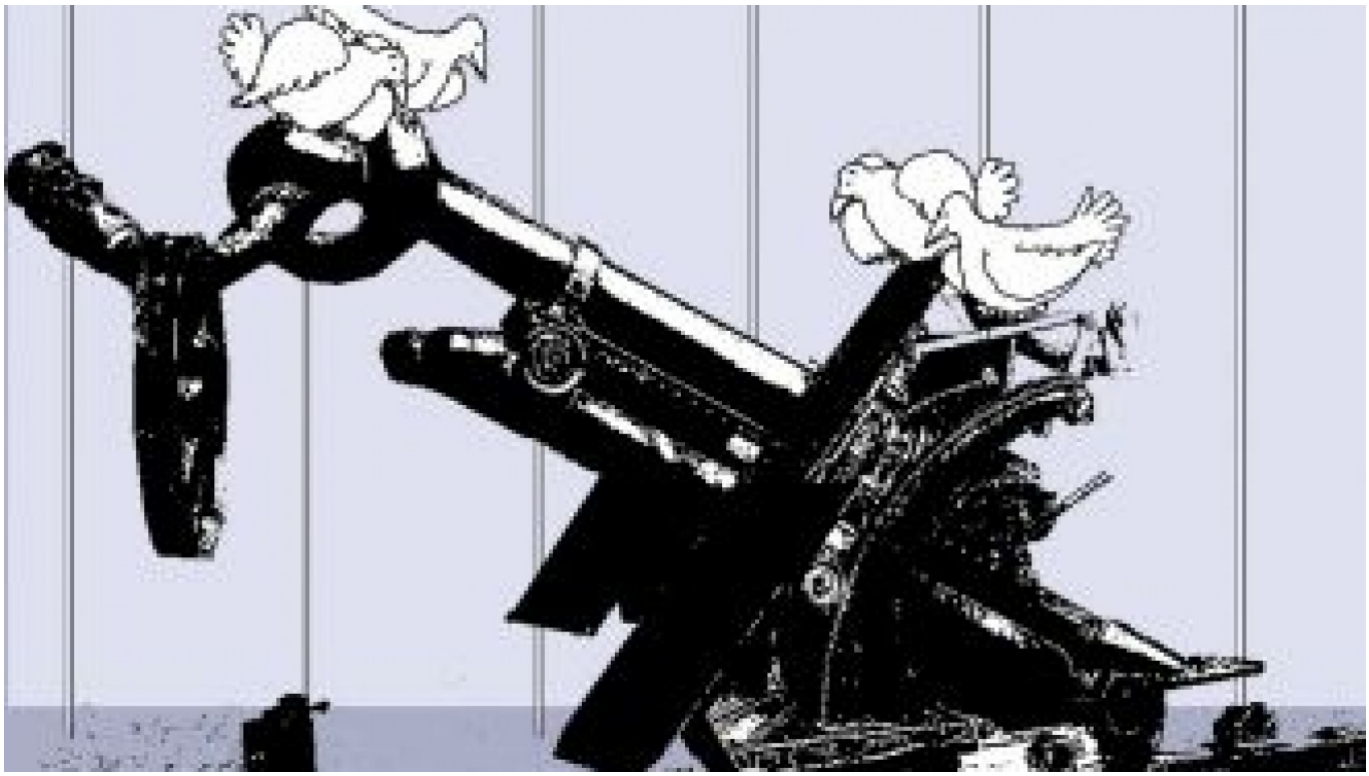
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How to Resolve the Georgia Conflict

By Samuel Charap

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Dec. 16 will mark the 14th time that parties to the Georgia conflict have gathered in Geneva. These negotiations include representatives from Georgia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Russia, the United States and the European Union, together with officials from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the United Nations. Up to now, the Geneva meetings have reportedly largely been exercises in grandstanding and bluster, with little concrete progress to speak of. But this time, progress is possible.

We need to start, however, by redefining the realm of the possible. The divisions between the parties on matters of principle are enormous. The United States, the EU and Georgia have a clear understanding of where Georgia's borders are and a clear conviction that Abkhazia and South Ossetia lie within them. They see Russia's military presence there as a violation of the principle of host-nation consent and thus illegal. Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have a different read on Georgia's borders, with all three calling the latter sovereign states, which permit the Russian military to operate there on a consensual basis.

Regardless of the merits of either view, one thing is for certain: After two years of holding firm, neither side is likely to change its stance anytime soon. But after discussing the issue in

both Moscow and Tbilisi and visiting areas affected by the conflict in recent days, we believe that the parties can and should move ahead on important steps on humanitarian and security matters despite these differences.

Thus far, Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have blocked movement on most substantive issues in Geneva on the grounds that Georgia must renounce the use of force before anything else can be discussed. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's unilateral declaration on Nov. 23 that "Georgia will never use force to restore its territorial integrity and sovereignty," followed by similar statements by authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, opens the way to a substantive, peaceful unfreezing of the postwar status quo.

The Foreign Ministry appears to concur, noting in a statement that the three pledges "create a new situation in the region." It is calling for examining ways for the international community to "legally strengthen" the pledges "with the help of existing instruments."

There is no better "existing instrument" for strengthening the nonuse-of-force regime than deploying the European Union Monitoring Mission, or EUMM, whose monitors have been stationed in Georgia since October 2008, to Gali and Akhalgori, districts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia that border the conflict lines and are predominantly populated by ethnic Georgians.

At least 40,000 ethnic Georgians still call Gali home, although many vitally depend on economic and social linkages with the neighboring Zugdidi district. In Akhalgori, about 7,000 residents were not driven from their homes during the fighting in August 2008 like most of South Ossetia's Georgian population. But the district was taken over by Russian and South Ossetian forces after the war, and most of its residents have since stayed away, pending resolution of security concerns or return of seized property. For both districts, interaction of local and neighboring residents with Russian, Abkhaz and South Ossetian guards at the conflict lines has somewhat stabilized but still contains the potential for violence and abuse.

The EUMM can also address a host of broader security issues by deploying monitors to Gali and Akhalgori. Conflicts with local populations that turn violent can lead to pressures for armed escalation. In the past, targeted attacks in Gali have led to Abkhaz accusations of Georgian-

engineered sabotage, a concern that could theoretically be replicated in Akhalgori. Georgia, in turn, accuses Abkhaz authorities of perpetrating acts of violence in Gali to intimidate local residents. Last week, the Georgian government arrested at least one Gali resident and started searching for two more on grounds of collaborating with a locally stationed Russian military officer to conduct acts of sabotage in Tbilisi.

All sides should have an interest in an impartial monitor to verify both protection of human rights and physical security in Gali and Akhalgori and to help avoid security provocations. Greater stability along the conflict lines benefits everybody.

Negotiators in Geneva should draw up new agreements to allow the EUMM access to Gali and Akhalgori that would not prejudice the parties' differences regarding the mission's existing mandate, which references Georgia's borders. This would be a new task for an "existing instrument" — one that is currently fulfilling similar functions on the side of the conflict

lines where it has been free to operate.

Agreements could be made between the EUMM and authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, or their presence could be mandated through separate bilateral documents for Abkhazia and South Ossetia — signed together with Tbilisi — that reaffirm nonuse-of-force commitments. The EUMM could verify compliance, at least in these specific areas. All parties should also commit to allowing a special crossing regime for local residents that facilitates freedom of movement and small-scale trade.

Since it's highly unlikely that the Russian military and border guards stationed in Gali and Akhalgori would allow the EUMM access to their facilities, the agreements could note that additional memorandums of understanding between the EUMM and Russian commanders on the ground delineating the precise rights of the monitors should be signed before deployment. After two years of impartiality and transparency, the EUMM appears to have gained the confidence of the Russian military, which is traditionally wary of Westerners in uniform, particularly near Russia's borders. And since the unarmed monitors would be there explicitly to look out for local residents, not inspect military facilities, it's quite possible that Moscow would be content with this arrangement.

In any case, it's worth a try. Now that the nonuse-of-force pledges have been made, this Geneva meeting can begin the process of redefining the realm of the possible on the Georgia conflict.

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