

## The “Three Presidents’ Declaration” as a Project for Post-Conflict Peace-Building in the Southern Caucasus

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**Abstract.** This article examines issues relating to the present-day geo-policy of the Southern Caucasus and the process of emergence of new unrecognized states: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. The author defines the role of Russia in the process of settling the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and providing assistance to Abkhazia and South Ossetia in terms of gaining recognition as independent states. The article also outlines the major dimensions to resolving political conflicts, set out in the Meindorf Declaration.

**Keywords:** Five-Day War, Russia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Meindorf Declaration.

### Introduction.

The new situation that emerged in the Southern Caucasus after the August 2008 Five-Day War created both potential opportunities and prospects and new threats and challenges in respect of regional security and stable development. Generally, this kind of crisis situations, military conflicts, and force majeure circumstances always up the ante in the regional political game, where the degree of possible losses and gains for the parties involved rises substantially. Incidentally, the overall configuration and geo-political distribution of internal and external factors in the region pretty much reminds one of the situation in the Southern Caucasus in the early 1990s.

The situation around settling the Karabakh conflict proved no exception either. After the Five-Day War, the situation in the zone of the Karabakh conflict in many respects demonstrated a novel dynamics; along with that, with the common interests and priorities of the main and interested parties being preserved, it came to symbolize a general shift in the regional background around Nagorno-Karabakh and the development of the talk process and other concomitant factors.

It is quite likely that a situation is emerging in the midterm geopolitical perspective in the Southern Caucasus, when Georgia, weakened after its military defeat, will attempt (and, apparently, not without success) to garner yet greater political and economic support from the West, Azerbaijan will be in a state of a sort of dismay, projecting the results of the August warfare on the Karabakh conflict, fearing a real threat to the country’s oil communications, and reviving the realness of the “Russian threat”, while Armenia will try to find its own place in the new situation, attempting to get something out of regional political processes.

On the other hand, there has been a situational boost in the role of Russia in the region, which rather has been in a state of a sort of euphoria for the time being. Furthermore, in the short- and mid-term perspective Russia has shored up its position and presence in the Southern Caucasus – suffice it to take account of the outcomes of its war against Georgia, the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by the Kremlin, and the open dislocation of Russian military bases in these once Georgian autonomies. Nonetheless, in the long-term perspective the deterioration of relations with the West and creation (or restoration) of a new aggressive image of Moscow in Western political consciousness are likely to lead to new serious problems in implementing Russian policy in the Southern Caucasus.

There was a consistent role of the EU in the August crisis around South Ossetia as well: Brussels is trying to occupy its own niche in regional politics and is seeking out novel formats for institutionalizing its presence in the Southern Caucasus. In point of fact, the deployment of

European observers in buffer zones around the borders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia was the European Union's first serious initiative in terms of projecting its political and partially military potential in effecting its peace-keeping operations beyond its own pale and with no direct support from NATO or the US for that matter. Although, surely, the coordination of the positions of the European Union on the Southern Caucasus with those of the North Atlantic Alliance and the US is effected under a very tight regimen.

Despite the West's deepening anti-Russian rhetoric, there is a precipitous drop in the likelihood of Georgia joining NATO real soon. In spite of all the optimistic statements by Georgian officials and quite successful for Tbilisi outcomes of the international donors' conference on providing war-torn Georgia with financial aid, held in October 2008 under the aegis of the EU, it is apparent that a number of key Western European members of the North Atlantic Alliance are clearly against Georgia joining NATO in a fast-track manner.

Amid the changed circumstances, Turkey is also trying to play its geopolitical game, having brought forward a novel initiative concerning the stabilization of the Southern Caucasus situation. Although politologists have been somewhat pessimistic over the prospects and feasibility of the regional initiative proposed by Ankara, this might be one of those frequent cases in politics when the political process itself gets more important than its forecasted results.

In this light, it is not yet clear how much the role of the United States has changed in respect of the region: are we dealing with a situational drop in the weight of the US subsequent to the events in Georgia, or will things go back to the way they were, or will what happened become the beginning of more profound processes that will cause a shift in the Southern Caucasus's standing in American policy? In any case, experts are unanimous in believing that a "riposte" by Washington will take place in the Southern Caucasus under Barack Obama already. Nonetheless, whether the US will become more active in the Southern Caucasus or whether a change of common political priorities will diminish the significance of this region in Washington's plans will depend not so much on the actions of new faces in the Democrat administration but rather on global financial, economic, and political developments across the world. Still, it is not likely that among multiple live global issues the Southern Caucasus is going to become a major issue on the American agenda in the light of the global economic crisis, the country's own economic problems, and B. Obama's promises to launch thorough changes inside the US itself.

One of the most important outcomes of the August conflict was a substantial boost in the appraisal of Georgia's risks as a transit-communications country, an energy and transport corridor especially due to the precedent set by the subsequent invasion of the territory of Georgia by Russian troops, seizing and establishing of control over strategically crucial, communications-wise, Georgian localities, such as Poti, Gori, Senaki, and Hashuri. There was irretrievable damage done to the image of Georgia, the region's "beacon of democracy" and, in general, a decent and predictable country with an efficient system of governance in place.

With different intervals of time during and after the warfare in the conflict zone, virtually all large-scale international energy and communications projects going through Georgia's territory ceased to operate. To a standstill was brought the operation of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Supsa oil pipelines and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline; no oil was transported over the Baku-Batumi rail route; the construction of the Kars-Akhalkalaki railway was suspended indefinitely. Kazakhstan elected to opt out of building a large oil refinery in the Batumi area. As a consequence, as of August, 2008, the State Oil Company of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SOCAR) was able to use none of the transportation routes and, in point of fact, exported no oil overseas during that month. In August, 2008, the Azerbaijan International Operating Company (AIOC), in turn, had to exclusively use the Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline and reorient its oil streams onto the Russian route [1].

The situation around Georgia and the downtime of the Caspian oil and natural gas pipelines running through the country also had a substantial toll on the overall financial-economic situation

in Azerbaijan [2]. Considering Baku's major dependence on oil and gas exports, the August events not only had a negative effect in terms of meeting the 2008 state budget but caused substantial corrections to be made in forming the country's budget for the next year.

Among the major political consequences for the actual participants in the warfare – Georgia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Russia – one should stress the total liquidation of Georgian-populated enclaves in South Ossetia (Tamarasheni, Kekhvi, Eredvi), deportation of the local Georgian population, and establishment of Tskhinval's control over the entire former South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast, including Akhlagori Municipality (formerly known as Leningor District), which since 1992 had virtually been under the control of the Georgian administration [3].

In Abkhazia, the major outcome of the swift-passing warfare was the establishment of complete control of the Abkhaz authorities over the territory of the entire former Abkhaz Autonomous Republic following the seizure of the Kodori Valley (so-called Upper Abkhazia) by Abkhaz troops with the support of the Russian army.

Thus, having achieved factual ethnic uniformity, South Ossetia (even amid total Russian political control) has currently turned into a real ethno-political factor in the Southern Caucasus region, having considerably shored up the parameters of its physical security. Abkhazia, in turn, having gained control over the Kodori Valley, has resolved the issues of its independent economic and political development for the long run.

It is quite natural that the “factual ethnic division” situation which has formed in South Ossetia will create in the foreseeable future serious obstacles in the way of the Georgian side's efforts to ensure a development of events in South Ossetia that would suit Tbilisi and Abkhazia too for that matter. It is possible that after a certain recovery period Tbilisi will again try to revive the “alternative governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in exile” projects – however, now they will indeed be in exile, i.e. beyond the pale of all the former administrative borders of these former Georgian autonomies.

Another important outcome of the new geopolitical situation, even regional status-quo rather, was the shift in the overall political and psychological background around the Karabakh conflict. A considerable correction was also undergone by the perception of future processes around Karabakh peace-building among the political elites and societies of the conflicting sides. Above all, this was indicated by a considerable drop in the likelihood of military action in Karabakh on the part of Azerbaijan and the realization of this fact by the country's political elite. This was especially influenced by the projection by Azerbaijani politicians and experts of the military operation aimed at regaining South Ossetia as unsuccessful for Georgia as the parent state.

Of course, initially on August 8, 2008, many in Azerbaijan took with satisfaction the news of the commencement of the siege of Tskhinval by the Georgian army, perceiving it as a logical example for carrying out a similar operation in Nagorno-Karabakh. In fact, we must acknowledge that one of the most significant elements of Azerbaijan's so-called “Karabakh strategy” had long been its open and public threat to resume warfare in the conflict zone. Its power blackmail was both reflected in statements by different-level Azerbaijani government officials and political figures and prevailed in the sentiment of the majority of the Azerbaijani political elite and general public. Additional argumentation of Azerbaijan's said policy in the eyes of its leadership and political elite also came from indefinitely high expectations over the role of the oil factor and the desire to impose on Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh an economically emaciating arms race “spiral”.

Therefore, it is quite natural that in Azerbaijan's information-propaganda field this sentiment reached each acme specifically on August 8-9, 2008, when the entire Azerbaijani information field was filled with reports and commentaries by Baku experts, politologists, and even official representatives of the Azerbaijani Ministry of Internal Affairs, who eagerly backed the actions of the Georgian leadership, spoke of Moscow's inability to do anything against steps taken by M. Saakashvili, and constantly drew analogies with the same kind of operation by Azerbaijan aimed at

getting Karabakh back “now coming soon” [4]. And then in the following days things suddenly got quiet ...

For, virtually, the whole two weeks, approximately starting from the second half of August 8, when it conclusively became clear that Russia had but already engaged in warfare, none of Azerbaijani top government officials made any statements or commentaries concerning the warfare in Georgia. And even experts and politologists kept silent or just limited themselves to general words in their commentaries on the situation in the region subsequent to the shocking conclusion of the Five-Day War.

The August “blitzkrieg the other way round” and an unexpectedly quick defeat of the Georgian army, which again had undertaken to get back by force the breakaway mutinous autonomy, South Ossetia (and, apparently, Abkhazia next), produced quite a clear and predictable impression in Baku. The analogies Azerbaijan’s political elite had in mind were more than mirrored. The apparency of Georgia’s entire loss in the mid-term perspective of even a hope of restoring its jurisdiction over Sukhumi and Tskhinval, the juridical recognition of the independence of these former Soviet autonomies by even if just one influential actor, multiple casualties in and the virtual demoralization of the Georgian army, the threat of loss of power in the country by M. Saakashvili’s team – all these considerations were hardly a desirable prospect for the government of Ilham Aliyev should warfare resume in the Karabakh conflict zone.

They must have also managed to assess on time that the continuation of power blackmail in respect of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh could lead to really dire consequences for Azerbaijan itself should warfare resume. This resulted in a radical change of the rhetoric of statements by Azerbaijani leaders concerning the prospects of the Karabakh conflict, which started in late August, 2008 – there appeared a sort of “constructiveness” and a mention of the need for the sides to continue the peace talks process, there disappeared mandatory mentions of a quick and inevitable restoration of “constitutional order” by Azerbaijan in Karabakh at all costs, etc.

Yet, we should add to all this a precipitous worsening over the period of September-October, 2008, of the anti-West sentiment on the part of the Azerbaijani elite and the further deepening of the process of the country’s islamization, which had been conspicuous for a long time already, as well as a surge of pro-Russian orientation among a part of Azerbaijan’s public. But these are rather the costs or, more truly, outcomes of carrying into effect “Azerbaijani complementarism” – for it is much more pleasant and safer to be friends with Russia, which won (even if quite unexpectedly) a regional war than keep going against it in the Southern Caucasus in tandem with the US and European states, which have not yet recovered after the August events. And this was vividly demonstrated by the outcomes of the early September 2008 blitz-visit to Baku by the US Vice-President D. Cheney, which proved unsuccessful for the American side [5].

This argument was to yet a greater extent substantiated by Ilham Aliyev’s subsequent signature under the text of the “Three Presidents’ Declaration” signed on November 2, 2008, through the intermediary of Moscow and virtually implying official Baku’s declarative refusal from attempts to resolve the Karabakh conflict militarily.

Yet, this shift in Azerbaijan’s political orientation might have been triggered not only by the realization of the Russian threat. In new conditions, Baku finds itself in a patently disadvantageous position as the initiator of resuming warfare in Karabakh. Politicians and experts engaged in exploring issues related to the regional policy and security of the Southern Caucasus have already long been clearly realizing that Armenia under any external circumstances will always be more “pro-West” than Azerbaijan and at the same time perceived by Moscow as the closer regional partner and ally than Azerbaijan. Thus, under any geopolitical lay of the land, the hypothetical commencement of a military operation against Karabakh and Armenia will be taken with greater displeasure in the West than Georgia’s attempt in South Ossetia, and Azerbaijan will not be able to garner Moscow’s support in the struggle against Russia’s military-political Southern-Caucasus ally and a CSTO (the Collective Security Treaty Organization) member. Moreover, Baku will by no

means be able to present the situation in the conflict zone to the West as a direct clash between “pro-Russia” Armenia and “pro-West” Azerbaijan. The political perception of Nagorno-Karabakh existing in the West is absolutely different from the West’s perception of Abkhazia and all the more so South Ossetia amid the absence in the zone of any peace-keepers or troops from third countries, the fact that the US Congress annually provides Stepanakert with direct financial aid, active contacts between the Karabakh authorities and public and various European institutions and establishments, etc.

Following the warfare in South Ossetia, there was a considerable boost in intra-political risks for Azerbaijan in case of initiating a war in Karabakh. Losing in a new war will mean for Azerbaijan the effective loss of Karabakh. Baku’s new defeat in the war for Karabakh could result in the fall of the ruling regime of the Alievs, the replacement of Azerbaijan’s entire present-day political elite, the destruction of the oil-and-gas and communications sectors, and possibly other losses.

Based on the outcomes of the August 2008 Five-Day War, to Moscow Abkhazia and South Ossetia turned into a sort of “continuation” of the Northern Caucasus and, therefore, a part of the Southern Caucasus Russia has access to is, in point of fact, limited to Armenia and Azerbaijan. To be able to administer an active policy in the region, Moscow can now use only its sway over Yerevan and Baku, and just in the framework of issues “common” to these conflicting sides at that. Perhaps, it is on account of realizing this fact and, concurrently, in an attempt to keep Georgia out of the common political processes in the Southern Caucasus (particularly, in the context of Turkey’s regional initiative coordinated with Moscow) that the Russian leadership activated the process of Karabakh peace-building in the fall of 2008.

Moscow’s technological and initially these initiatives were almost a mirrored reflection of the previous settlement attempts by Washington and Brussels. However, in the fall of 2008 it was now not the Western initiative that was met with counteraction on the part of Russia – the West was doing all it could to impede Moscow’s efforts to push through some kind of an agreement whereby the role of peacekeepers dividing the Azerbaijani, Armenian, and Karabakh sides would be performed by Russian troops.

However, the primary aim of the Kremlin’s “Karabakh initiative” seems to still have been disowning in the eyes of the West the negative political-psychological consequences of the August war with Georgia and Moscow’s recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. That is, by getting active in Karabakh peace-building the Kremlin pursued, in reality, quite a pragmatic, if a bit limited, goal – creating in the mind of the West and global information-propaganda space some sort of a semblance of “constructive” actions by Russia, capable of not just waging and winning wars against “small countries” over the post-Soviet space (like in August, 2008, against Georgia) but of settling, and, above all, controlling, regional ethno-political conflicts, the Karabakh and Transnistrian ones serving as an example. It was the Meindorf Declaration signed in Moscow Oblast on November 2, 2008, by the presidents of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia that all this resulted in.

### **Conclusion.**

Such are the major parameters in the development of political processes from the standpoint of the primary global centers of power in the Southern Caucasus subsequent to the August war between Russia and Georgia. One can believe that after the Five-Day War the dynamics of processes around Karabakh remains the same, but the regional background and political components around the parties involved in the conflict have somewhat changed. Political preconditions for resuming warfare in the Karabakh conflict zone have also depreciated and, consequently, common military risks in the South Caucasus region have declined.

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