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THE CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASS ANALYST

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Submission Guidelines:

Analytical Articles require a three to four sentence Key Issue introduction to the article based on a news hook. Rather than a general, overarching analysis, the article must offer considered and careful judgment supported with concrete examples. The ideal length of analytical articles is between 1,100 and 1,500 words. The articles are structured as follows:

KEY ISSUE: A short 75-word statement of your conclusions about the issue or news event on which the article focuses.

BACKGROUND: 300-450 words of analysis about what has led up to the event or issue and why this issue is critical to the region. Include background information about the views and experiences of the local population.

IMPLICATIONS: 300-450 words of analysis of the ramifications of this event or issue, including where applicable, implications for the local people's future.

CONCLUSIONS: 100-200 words that strongly state your conclusions about the impact of the event or issue.

Field Reports focus on a particular news event and what local people think about the event. Field Reports address the implications the event or activity analyzed for peoples' lives and their communities. Field Reports do not have the rigid structure of Analytical Articles, and are shorter in length, averaging ca. 700-800 words.

Those interested in joining The Analyst's pool of authors to contribute articles, field reports, or contacts of potential writers, please send your CV to: <scornell@jhu.edu> and suggest some topics on which you would like to write.

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RUSSIA SEEKS INCREASED CONTROL OVER KARABAKH RESOLUTION AFTER CLASHES BETWEEN ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN

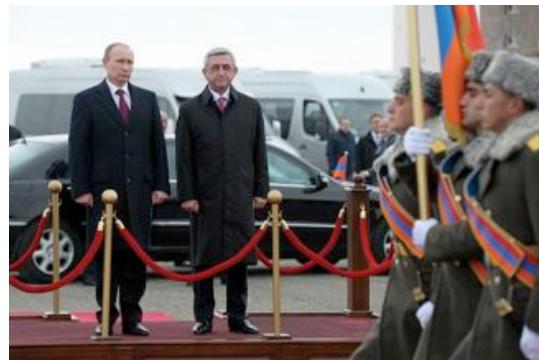
Armen Grigoryan

After the recent clashes between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces, Russia's leadership attempts to act more decisively in order to compromise the OSCE Minsk Group mediation efforts and to compel Armenia and Azerbaijan to accept Russia's special role in the region. Russia's proximity and strong influence over political elites and societies gives it an advantage over other Minsk Group co-chairs – the U.S. and France. However, the lack of security guarantees and economic perspectives may induce Armenia to start reviewing its attitudes concerning relations with different international actors and regional integration frameworks.

BACKGROUND: Armenia's president Serzh Sargsyan faced a serious embarrassment during the summit of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council on May 29 in Astana, as he could not sign the treaty on establishing the Eurasian Union. Before the signing ceremony, Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev read a letter from Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev requiring Armenia's admission to the union only within its internationally recognized borders. Nazarbayev also clearly stated that Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko had known about Aliyev's letter and had agreed on further joint actions. Sargsyan, in turn, was only informed during a televised session in Astana.

As the presidents of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia required establishing customs control posts on the border between Armenia and

Nagorno-Karabakh before joining the Eurasian Union, Armenia's signature of the Eurasian Union treaty was postponed and is currently scheduled for October.



(Source: Wikimedia Commons/kremlin.ru)

Sargsyan's embarrassment was largely a result of his own policies aimed at pleasing Russia, and demonstrated the failure of the analytical departments of the president's staff, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the National Security Service. It should be recalled that during the previous summit of the Eurasian Economic Council in October

2013, Lukashenko stated that Armenia would have to resolve its territorial dispute with Azerbaijan, and that Customs Union members would consider Azerbaijan's position on the issue. Kazakhstan's officials also made several statements conveying the same message.

The massive gunfire and attempted subversive operations on the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh and on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan between July 30 and August 4 became another serious challenge for the Armenian government, but at the same time provided an opportunity to mobilize public support. This is particularly important for Sargsyan who needs to dissuade possible mass protests as economic decline continues.

IMPLICATIONS: The recent hostilities on the line of contact followed by a presidential meeting in Sochi have different connotations. The Armenian army's relative success in deterring Azerbaijani forces has been used by President Sargsyan's proxies and loyal media to relieve public discontent. Moreover, Prime Minister Hovik Abrahamyan together with several cabinet members and MPs went on a tour to the border regions and Karabakh. Abrahamyan's activity may be viewed not only as an attempt to relieve negative public opinion because of the recent considerable increase in energy prices and other actions taken by the government: he is also likely preparing for the next presidential elections as Sargsyan will not be able to run for a third time. It should be noted that Abrahamyan could secure support

from the second largest party, Prosperous Armenia. The party's leader, Gagik Tsarukyan, and Abrahamyan are in-laws and have joint business interests. However, Abrahamyan is not the only candidate seeking to cultivate a tough man's image; Minister of Defense Seyran Ohanyan is also currently widely praised by different actors. Ohanyan moved to Armenia from Karabakh in 2007, following the path of Sargsyan and his predecessor Robert Kocharyan, and may potentially become a favorite of the powerful Karabakh clan.

Following the trilateral presidential meeting in Sochi on August 8-9, Vladimir Putin is increasingly seeking to cast himself as a peacemaker and to alleviate the damage done to Russia's image by its actions in Ukraine and the downing of the MH17 flight. Hence, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan presents Russia with an opportunity to present itself as a key partner in supporting international peace and security. However, Russia's sincerity can be questioned based on several factors: its continuous contribution to the militarization of the region by supplying both conflicting parties with arms; a massive propaganda campaign blaming the West, and primarily the U.S., for the increase in tensions; and, as even some Russian experts admit, attempts to replace the OSCE Minsk Group mediation efforts and to compel Armenia and Azerbaijan to accept Russia's special role in the region. Characteristically, after the Sochi meeting Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov made a statement mentioning

future meetings in a trilateral format as agreed upon, and also mentioned a “contact group” that would presumably act outside the Minsk Group framework.

Concerning Eurasian Union membership, some members of the Armenian government are for several reasons becoming less enthusiastic about it, although they still pay lip service to their commitment to “Eurasian integration.” First, there is a clear perception that sanctions against Russia will diminish the union’s economic perspective. Second, negotiations with the Eurasian Economic Council concerning possible exemptions from higher customs duties have not been successful. Third, applying the Customs Union’s tariff regime would result in a breach of WTO rules followed by a possible requirement to compensate WTO members’ financial losses.

Another important factor is Belarus’s and Kazakhstan’s non-enthusiastic attitude to Armenia’s prospective membership. Belarus and Kazakhstan currently have an opportunity to prevent the adoption of regulatory decisions biased in favor of Russia, but Armenia is considered too loyal to Moscow and its membership could presumably result in Russia *de facto* having two votes. Hence, the Armenian government may try to avoid Eurasian Union membership by using Belarus’s and Kazakhstan’s objections rather than by openly challenging Russia.

The government must also consider the possibility of public upheavals in a few months as a consequence of

deteriorating economic conditions. Many Armenians working in Russia return to Armenia in November or December and then go back to Russia in February or March. As the Russian economy is currently likely to decline and a number of jobs may disappear, a large number of men could be unable to work and support their families as they have been doing for years.

CONCLUSIONS: While skepticism towards the West’s initiatives still persists, the recent border clashes have induced the part of society less influenced by Russian propaganda to question Russia’s role in resolving the Karabakh conflict and providing security guarantees for Armenia. An understanding that Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization would not act to protect Armenia in case of a large-scale war is taking root, albeit slowly. Importantly, Armenian officials have excluded the possibility of deploying Russian “peacekeeping” troops in Karabakh and adjacent territories; the Ministry of Defense made an official statement before the meeting in Sochi, and Sargsyan confirmed this stance after returning to Yerevan.

Being stuck with the invasion of Ukraine and hopefully unable to engage simultaneously in a massive operation in the South Caucasus because of logistical problems and other reasons, Russia still views the region as its backyard. Its interest in becoming the exclusive arbiter and using borderline tensions as a tool of pressure on the conflicting parties should be awarded more attention. Besides, the massive

militarization of the region may at some point, after another outbreak of gunfire on the line of contact, develop into a large-scale conflict even though neither party would be able to solve its proclaimed goals.

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RUSSIA TAKES STEPS TO ABSORB SOUTH OSSETIA

Valeriy Dzutsev

Against the backdrop of the events in Ukraine, Moscow appears to take steps toward quietly incorporating the Georgian breakaway region of South Ossetia into Russia. The republican authorities announced that plans were under way for South Ossetia and Russia to establish a unified customs checkpoint at the border between the two countries. Russia is on a collision course with Georgia over the South Caucasian country's recent signing of an Association Agreement with the EU. As South Ossetia is again becoming an important tool for Moscow's policies in the South Caucasus, the Russian government appears intent on establishing even greater control over its satellite state in the region and using it against Georgia.

BACKGROUND: On July 25, the chief of the South Ossetian customs service, Murat Tskhovrebov, told the republican informational service that South Ossetian and Russian officials had previously discussed opening a joint customs point at Lower Zaramag, in North Ossetia, which is part of the Russian Federation. The goods traveling via the Roki tunnel from Russia into South Ossetia currently have to pass two customs controls – the Russian, at Lower Zaramag and the South Ossetian, at Ruk. Even though no official date has been set for merging the customs services, the fact that intensive consultations are held indicate that it may happen at any time. Depriving South Ossetia of its border controls at the border with Russia, however nominal they may be, will effectively render this territory even more like another Russian region. This step is designed as part of Moscow's signaling game intended to steer

Georgia's political course in a direction desired by Russia.

Russia officially recognized South Ossetia in August 2008 after a brief war with Georgia. Although South Ossetia has heavily depended on Moscow for its security and funding, the authorities of the tiny territory have sought to retain a semblance of agency, clashing with Moscow over positions in the republican government. The latest parliamentary elections in June 2014 brought the opposition party United Ossetia to power in South Ossetia. The opposition party's primary political slogan has been to join South Ossetia with Russia. Moscow's favorite politician, Anatoly Bibilov, heads the party, and the election results indicated a tighter Russian control over the republic.

The most vivid consequence of the political change came in July, when South Ossetia officially recognized the "Donetsk People's Republic" and

“Lugansk People’s Republic” in the restive Eastern Ukraine as independent states. The surprising recognition came even though South Ossetia’s president Leonid Tibilov had warned earlier in June that South Ossetians should keep away from fighting for the pro-Russian forces in Ukraine. The South Ossetian government also recognized these entities ahead of their principal supporter and creator, the Russian Federation.

Interestingly, even pro-Kremlin Russian analysts recognize the purely instrumental role that this territory plays in Moscow’s strategic plans in the South Caucasus. In an interview for the Ekho Kavkaza radio, the Russian expert on South Ossetia Yevgeny Krutikov lamented the fact that several Russian agencies are dealing with the republic, rather than one that is principally responsible. According to Krutikov, this creates “chaos,” since South Ossetians do not understand what Moscow wants them to do. “South Ossetia turns into a playing card, an instrument for the power games of the Russian groups of influence, which use the republic and certain individuals in Tskhinvali without much thinking about how this will impact them.” Indeed, South Ossetia’s recognition of the Ukrainian breakaway “republics” has hardly benefited its fragile statehood.

IMPLICATIONS: Vladislav Surkov, one of the Kremlin’s most famous administrators, has reportedly returned to oversee Russian politics in South Ossetia. Even though Surkov was earlier dispatched to the South

Caucasus, he disappeared from the region’s politics as the events in Ukraine unfolded, apparently dedicating his time to overseeing Russian policies in Ukraine. Having returned to the South Caucasus, Surkov replaced two other Moscow officials that oversaw Russian policies toward the Georgian breakaway republics, Vladimir Chernov and Sergei Chebotaryov from the Administration of the President of Russian Federation. These administrative reshuffles in Moscow reportedly impact who among the South Ossetian public figures and what political forces receive the most favorable treatment from Russian authorities.



(Source: Wikimedia Commons/UN)

Speaking of the possible implications of joining the customs services of Russia and South Ossetia, Russian economist Alexander Karavayev alleged that Georgia’s signing of the Association Agreement with the EU would actually be beneficial for Russia as it would allow the country to develop a more profitable relationship with its South Caucasian neighbor. Georgia and its European allies would in Karavayev’s

opinion react positively to the removal of the South Ossetian border checkpoint as a symbolic step to roll back Russia's recognition of South Ossetia.

Despite Karavayev's optimistic assessment of the imminent boost to Russia's economic ties with Georgia, the Russian government's signals tell quite the opposite story. At the end of July, Russia's Ministry for Economic Development announced that at the request of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it prepared a government decree for suspending the free trade act between Russia and Georgia from 1994. The new legislation is explicitly tied to Georgia's drift toward the EU and is currently undergoing evaluation at the Russian Ministry for Justice. A suspension of the free trade agreement between Russia and Georgia will reportedly come into force simultaneously with the agreement between Georgia and the EU.

Besides the geopolitical competition between Russia and the EU that precludes the current Russian regime from recasting its relationship with Georgia in cooperative terms, there is also at least one important domestic consideration for Moscow. If Russia started building closer economic ties with a Georgia that features a higher level of integration with the EU, the bordering North Caucasus would become one of the primary beneficiaries of such relations. Given Russian fears of separatism in the North Caucasus, Moscow certainly would not like to see even a remote presence in this territory

of the EU or of its agents. Economic prosperity in the North Caucasus that does not depend on financial aid from Moscow would also be considered detrimental to Russian policies in the region. Therefore, the current Russian government is unlikely to welcome a more prosperous and EU-aligned Georgia. Moscow is even less inclined to allow an expansion of the Georgian-Russian economic ties, as it would directly affect its tight grip on the North Caucasus, undermining its control over this region.

An alternative for Moscow is to play the South Ossetian card, oscillating between formally annexing this territory and symbolically downgrading its own recognition of it. Military gambles also remain a possibility, because the EU's promise to Georgia is so lucrative that the elaborate signaling game played by Moscow is unlikely to find much appeal among the relevant officials in Tbilisi.

CONCLUSIONS: As Georgia has taken decisive steps toward establishing a close relationship with the EU that is based on expanding economic ties with the Western alliance, Moscow's response to this development is to use economic sanctions and its satellite statelets in the South Caucasus to thwart it or at the very least make Georgia's transition as hard as possible. Considering the administrative reshuffles in Moscow among the policymakers working on the South Caucasus, it appears that the Russian government is considering a wide range of options in Georgia that may even include military action. The tiny

territory of South Ossetia may again become one of the Kremlin's pawns, and used to stir instability and advance Russian interests in the region.

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THE GEORGIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND ITS INVOLVEMENT IN NATIONAL POLITICS

Carolyn Funke

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) emerged as Georgia's most respected and influential institution. It has played a significant role in the Georgian public sphere ever since and enjoys a high level of trust among the Georgian population. But as Georgia moves towards Euro-Atlantic integration, the GOC increasingly appears to develop into a political force. Recent statements by the clergy on Georgia's municipal elections and the GOC's active involvement against law-making and political processes intended to strengthen social and political pluralism raise concerns over its role in Georgia's democratic development.

BACKGROUND: On July 6, shortly before the second round of the mayoral elections in Tbilisi's and seven other self-governed cities, and runoffs in races for *gamgebeli* (municipal executive) in 13 municipalities, a senior cleric of the GOC, Bishop Jakob, weighed into the election campaign with a politically-charged sermon in the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Tbilisi. He called on voters to "reject" the Georgian major opposition party and former government, the United National Movement (UNM) whose representatives "are not repenting for what they have done to the country." He accused the UNM of "[stripping] the nation of its dignity" and expressed his wish for the UNM to "stand aside for a while [...] and look at their mistakes."

Four NGOs, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, Georgian Young Lawyers Association, Transparency International Georgia and Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center called on the Central Election Commission to study and react to this case. They accused Bishop Jakob of making statements amounting to election campaigning, which would constitute a violation of the law. The Georgian election code bans election campaigning by religious organizations and a violation of the rules carries a fine amounting to GEL 2,000 (US\$ 1,130).

The Central Election Commission launched administrative proceedings against Bishop Jakob, who is one of three deputy heads of the GOC. On August 14, however, the Central Election Commission dismissed the

human rights groups' accusations and issued a statement in which it accepted Bishop Jakob's explanation that he made his remarks in the capacity of an individual clergyman, and not as a representative of the GOC as a whole. Yet, the constitutional agreement between the Georgian state and the GOC contradicts this line of argumentation; it states that the Patriarch's deputies represent the GOC without requiring any additional authorization.

Another example that demonstrates the GOC's active political involvement is the adoption of the controversial bill banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity earlier this year. The GOC tried to intervene in the legislative process and wanted to block the bill, claiming that it would legalize homosexuality, which it considered a "deadly sin." While the bill was a requirement for Georgia to be granted a short-term visa-free regime by the EU, the GOC massively influenced the wording and control mechanisms of the new law, which was eventually passed unanimously by the parliament with 115 votes against 0.

Accordingly, human rights organizations lament that the bill lacks efficient implementation mechanisms and financial penalties for those responsible of discrimination, making the bill largely ineffective. Baia Pataria of Union Sapari, an NGO helping victims of domestic violence, said during the parliamentary committee hearing on April 16 that without efficient enforcement mechanisms, the bill leaves the impression that the

government wants it in order to demonstrate that it has met one of its requirements under the visa liberalization action plan with the EU, and not for genuinely addressing the problem.



(Source: Wikimedia Commons)

IMPLICATIONS: Over the past two decades, the GOC has developed into a highly politicized institution. Supporters of radical positions, who dominate the hierarchy within the GOC, maintain a huge influence on the political sphere and elite in Georgia. Their critical stance towards Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration is evident in the GOC's attitude toward the fundamental rights that the EU grants to individuals, for example to religious and sexual minorities.

Radical Orthodox Priest Davit Isakadze said of the anti-discrimination bill, "If this is a requirement from the EU in order to have visa liberalization with Europe, then it is better not to have this visa liberalization at all rather than to make such inclinations like homosexuality a legal norm." Archpriest Lasurashvili took the same stance in the debate on the anti-discrimination bill: "Who needs such a Europe if this Europe depraves us?" On the other hand, a few dissenting voices also exist within the GOC on the anti-discrimination bill. Ilarion Shengelia,

archpriest from Zugdidi, wrote on his Facebook wall on April 30 that he had read the bill and “could not find anything tragic or anti-Christian” in it. “The Church has always been against violence, injustice and discrimination.”

The debate on the anti-discrimination bill reflects a division in the GOC, between traditionalist and reformists; the former show little to no tolerance for other beliefs and religious traditions and massively seek to impose their views and perceptions on Georgian society. Their worldview is characterized by an “us versus them” concept that contains an anti-Western, anti-democratic bias. The reformists, on the other hand, support reforms of the GOC and the ecumenical idea in Georgia and have a more cosmopolitan outlook.

Adding to the internal divide between traditionalists and reformists, the diminishing power of Patriarch Ilia II could become a major concern. When Ilia became Patriarch in 1977, the GOC had only 50 priests. It now has approximately 1,700, many of whom have never received comprehensive religious education. Many Georgians worry about the health of the 81-year-old man, who has helped guide his country during the turbulent times since independence. Succession to the patriarch could pose a significant challenge, because it is hard to find someone of the same caliber. Despite some political missteps, the Patriarch is a national symbol and is seen by many as a respected source of stability.

His vanishing power over the ultra-conservative clergy is worrisome,

especially since Georgians grow increasingly dissatisfied with the political elite. The exceptionally low voter turnout in this year’s municipal elections and the fact that eight run-offs had to take place in Georgia’s major cities could be an indication of the Georgian population’s disappointment with the Georgian Dream government, which promised to create more jobs and bolster the crumbling Georgian economy. Instead, a devastating social situation and a high unemployment rate continue to determine the reality for most Georgians.

As dissatisfaction with politicians grows, the GOC has a key role to play as a stabilizing force. Rather than seeking to polarize or reinforce fears within society of e.g. homosexuality and religious pluralism, the GOC could utilize its authority to calm down tempers and ease concerns that result both from the growing complexity of the political and social reality and the dire economic situation. To do so, the Church needs to overcome its internal divide, ensure the quality of religious teachings, improve the training for priests and take a pragmatic stance toward Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

CONCLUSIONS: The GOC continues to exercise as much influence on the political elite as ever before. Yet those who perceive Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration as a threat dominate the hierarchy of the Church. Their interference in politics is becoming increasingly incompatible with Georgia’s pursued path of Euro-

Atlantic integration and its attempts to establish social and political pluralism. With the growing disappointment of the democratically elected Georgian Dream Coalition, the GOC will likely remain the political center in Georgia in the years to come. The GOC could use its authority to play a significant role in establishing a climate of tolerance and to take a constructive stance in facilitating dialogue among conflicting parties. But if Georgia's most respected institution instead chooses to nourish a climate of extreme nationalism and intolerance, this may harm Georgia's democratic development and its image of an open and tolerant country.

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SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION SET TO EXPAND

John C.K. Daly

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) currently consists of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. At an August 1 meeting in the Tajik capital Dushanbe, foreign ministers from the six member states reached consensus on legal documents providing for expanding the SCO to include four current SCO observer states, India, Pakistan, Iran and Mongolia, passing two draft documents on expansion for approval at the SCO summit to be held in Dushanbe September 11-12. If passed, it will be the largest expansion of the SCO since its founding.

BACKGROUND: The Shanghai Five grouping was created in 1996 with the signing of the Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions by the heads of states of Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. In 1997 the same countries signed the Treaty on Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions at a meeting in Moscow. Finally, in June 2001 the Shanghai five (along with Uzbekistan) signed the Declaration of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, praising the role played thus far by the Shanghai Five mechanism and aiming to transform it to a higher level of cooperation.

SCO member states cover more than three-fifths of Eurasia with a quarter of the world's population. The addition of India, Pakistan, Iran and Mongolia will add another 1.6 billion people to the SCO's membership. Tajikistan currently holds the SCO's rotating presidency. Decisions on SCO

membership and observer status are made with the consensus of all member countries.

Iran first submitted an official application for SCO observer status on 25 February 2005. Iran's interest in upgrading its SCO observer status to full membership dates back to March 2008, when it first applied for upgrading its status. Not surprisingly, beset by rhetoric about a possible Israeli attack against its nuclear facilities and the ongoing disintegration of neighboring Iraq, Iran's quest for SCO full membership can be seen as an additional layer of international diplomatic "life insurance." On Nov. 12, 2011, Iranian Supreme National Security Council's Secretary Assistant Ali Bageri reiterated that Iran was again seeking full SCO membership, telling journalists in Moscow, "We have already submitted a relevant application."

Security agenda is a top SCO priority, with many of its policy documents delineating joint approaches to terrorism, separatism, and extremism threats. The main coordinating bodies for security cooperation are the Secretariat of the SCO in Beijing and the Regional Counterterrorist Structure based in Tashkent. Russia and China share a commonality with their fellow SCO members about rising Islamic militancy in Eurasia, but after that their security concerns diverge, with Russia primarily looking westward toward NATO's eastward expansion, while beyond Xinjiang, China's security concerns are largely to the east, in the South China Sea and most notably, over U.S. policy toward Taiwan and possible disruptions of Chinese maritime energy imports from the Middle East by U.S. Navy ships based in the western Pacific.

The world will get a chance to see the SCO's military capacities during its Peace Mission 2014 exercise, to be held August 24-29 in China's Inner Mongolia region. Peace Mission 2014, the SCO's largest joint military operation in a decade, will involve about 7,000 troops, with China providing the majority of the forces.

IMPLICATIONS: The SCO expansion comes at a time of rising tension between NATO, the U.S. and EU with Russia over its policies towards Ukraine.

Alexei Maslov, the head of the Department for Oriental Studies of the Higher School of Economics in Moscow observed, "At present, the SCO has started to counterbalance

NATO's role in Asia. Consequently, these countries want to take part in the SCO in the capacity of safeguard of their interests. At present, the SCO is strengthening because the American policy towards Asia has been excessively tough and is aimed at suppressing their interests. The American policy contradicts the interests of Asian countries." Acknowledging regional instability, the SCO foreign ministers at their August 1 meeting discussed the situation in Afghanistan.



(Source: Wikimedia Commons/kremlin.ru)

One point on which dominant SCO members China and Russia concur is to limit or end U.S. military influence in Central Asia since it first appeared in late 2001 in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The SCO scored a notable triumph towards that end when on July 5, 2005, when the presidents of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan at a SCO summit signed a joint declaration requesting the U.S.-led anti-terrorist coalition forces to set a date for leaving Central Asia. Three weeks later, following Washington's ambivalent response to the May 13, 2005, tragic events in Andijan, the Uzbek government on July 29 told the Pentagon to evacuate its airbase

facilities in Karshi-Khanabad within six months, which it did in November 2005.

In neighboring Kyrgyzstan, then Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs Roza Otunbayeva held a news conference on July 6, 2005, to rehash the SCO declaration's arguments for setting a deadline on the U.S.-led military presence. Otunbayeva reiterated the SCO contention that Afghanistan had essentially been stabilized and that consequently, active military operations were no longer necessary, implying that the U.S. Manas airbase had lost its reason for being. Citing the 2001 U.S.-Kyrgyzstan Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), Otunbayeva stated, "We intend to act in line with this and discuss the matter. We want to know how long the base is going to stay." The U.S. would not leave Manas until nine years later, in 2014.

Another indication of the SCO's ideological slant against U.S. is that, while the U.S. has sought observer status at the SCO, its requests have been denied.

In light of worsening relations between the West and Russia over Ukraine, China's increasing assertions of sovereignty in the South China Sea, sanctions on Iran over its civilian nuclear energy program and rising Eurasian nervousness about the unsettled state of Afghanistan after the International Security Assistance Force completes its drawdown in December and the subsequent security vacuum there, the value of the SCO to member states as a bloc against Western

interference, terrorism and economic integration will only increase.

CONCLUSIONS: What the organization currently lacks however, is a broad consensus beyond a few vaguely worded declarations about how these issues are to be tackled. An example of this is how none of the other SCO members have signed onboard to Russia's sanctions policies against Western nations over its Ukrainian policies. Economic issues also divide the alliance, given China's predominant fiscal power. For the foreseeable future then, the SCO, with its nebulous declarations and member states' nationalist agendas, will likely limit itself to activities that all can agree upon, such as multinational counter-terrorist exercises rather than evolving into something resembling an Asian counterweight to NATO, however attractive such an option might seem to SCO superpowers Russia and China.

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TBILISI CITY COURT ORDERS SAAKASHILI'S DETENTION IN ABSENTIA

Eka Janashia

The summer of 2014 was replete with striking political events in Georgia. The country held local elections on June 15 - July 12 with a landslide victory for Georgian Dream (GD) and signed a historical Association Agreement (AA) with the EU on June 27. Shortly after the polls, PM Irakli Gharibashvili reshuffled his cabinet to deliver "all of the promises pledged by GD" with double "energy, motivation and efficiency." However, an event that received considerable attention both at home and internationally was the Tbilisi City Court's August 2 order to place former president Mikheil Saakashvili in pre-trial detention.

On July 28, Georgian prosecutor's office filed charges against Saakashvili related to the anti-government protests erupting on November 7, 2007, and the subsequent police raid on Imedi TV resulting in tycoon Badri Patarkatsishvili's loss of the TV station and other assets.

The prosecutor's motion accused Saakashvili and then former Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili, who is currently in jail, for deliberate use of excessive force aiming to intimidate protesters and prevent further rallies. The deployment of army units in central Tbilisi during the dispersal of the protest was also considered a violation of the law. On August 2, in compliance with the prosecutor's claims, Tbilisi City Court ordered

Saakashvili's pre-trial detention in absentia.

Three days later, new criminal charges were filed in connection with an attack conducted in 2005 against then opposition MP Valeri Gelashvili, a businessman and a member of the Republican Party. Gelashvili was severely beaten up by masked, armed men shortly after an interview in which Gelashvili insulted the former president's family and accused Saakashvili of confiscating his property. "Motivated by personal revenge," Saakashvili commanded then Defense Minister Irakli Okruashvili to beat Gelashvili. As he refused to do so, Saakashvili handed over the task to Merabishvili who complied, the prosecutor's motion claims.

The indictments against Saakashvili and Merabishvili were filed under part three of article 333 of the criminal code, which deals with excessive use of official powers committed by use of violence and insult of the victim's dignity and envisages imprisonment from 5 to 8 years.

Saakashvili's defense lawyer, Otar Kakhidze, termed the evidence presented by the prosecutors insufficient and as fabrications ultimately drawing on a witness testimony of then parliamentary chairperson Nino Burjanadze. Kakhidze submitted an appeal to the Tbilisi

Court of Appeals in an attempt to reverse the court's decision, though the latter found the complaint inadmissible.

In a statement published on August 1, a group of five NGOs called on the Georgian authorities to maintain transparency and accountability to avoid public and international perceptions of political retribution. The statement expressed suspicion over the fact that the criminal charges against Saakashvili were filed instantly after the latter failed to appear for questioning, casting doubts on the actual need to summon Saakashvili as a witness.

The decision on Saakashvili's pre-trial detention drew criticism from the EU as well as the U.S. Sweden's Foreign Minister Carl Bildt said that "Georgian authorities deviate from the European path by using the justice system for revenge." In the same fashion, the European People's Party (EPP), a partner of Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM), stated that politically motivated actions pursued by the Georgian government means that it does not take the AA seriously. It was Saakashvili's ongoing activities in Ukraine that incited charges against him, EPP said.

The U.S. Department of State and U.S. Senators also expressed concern and disappointment over the issue. A joint statement released by Republican Senators John McCain and Jim Risch says that perceptibly the ruling GD coalition systematically punishes their political opponents, imposing "unnecessary challenges in moving our relationship forward."

The GD members and high-ranking government officials have dismissed Western criticism. MP Giorgi Volski disapproved the EPP statement assessing it as "factually incorrect and prejudicial." PM Garibashvili called Bildt a representative of the "club of Saakashvili's friends, who have certain obligations of friendship" and assured the public that Saakashvili's case would have no effect on Georgia's European integration process. The Swedish Foreign Minister was quick in responding that "if the Georgian PM does not want to listen to the best friends of his country in EU, that's his choice. We take note."

What became clear after Saakashvili's indictment is that from the standpoint of the EU and U.S., the ruling coalition may have crossed a red line. Since GD came to power, EU and U.S. officials have repeatedly indicated that the coalition should move beyond past confrontations and focus on the future.

The episode is yet another indication that GD tends to prioritize narrow political interests over strategic national ones.

CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLICS PARTICIPATE IN SCO DRILLS IN CHINA

Oleg Salimov

The Central Asian countries are taking part in an antiterrorist exercise in China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous region. The military training ground "Zhurihe" in the administrative district Hohhot will host military personnel from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Russia, arriving to conduct antiterrorist exercises code-named "Peaceful Mission - 2014." The military drills are planned for August 24-29, 2014 as part of "The prospects of cooperation between Ministries of Defense of Shanghai Cooperation Organization members for 2014-2015 years."

The military exercise in the autonomous region historically inhabited by ethnic Mongols and with close proximity to the restive Xinjiang indicates the Chinese government's anxiety over the spread of separatist ideas in the Northwestern part of the country. In particular, when announcing the joint antiterrorist exercise during a press conference on June 26, a representative of China's Ministry of Defense, Yan Yuizun, declared that the drills are aimed at preventing and controlling terrorism, extremism, and separatism as the main evils of the modern world.

The total number of servicemen taking part in the military drills reaches 7,000. They mostly arrive to China and concentrate in the city of Kashgar, a hotbed of Uighur rebellion and frequent bloodshed. While Beijing risks

unnecessary provocations if it conducts military drills in the heart of the Uighur region, it certainly sends out a strong message by selecting Kashgar as a transit and logistic hub for foreign military units. The concentrated grouping of heavily armed military forces and equipment serves the purpose of intimidating the local Uighur population and at the same time assures the Han Chinese population, a frequent target of attacks by Uighur militants, of the central government's ability to protect them.

Also, the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, termed Southern Mongolia by local opposition activists, was deliberately selected for the antiterrorist exercise. Official Beijing is interested in conducting war games in a region with a historical and ethnical inclination towards mainland Mongolia as a continuation of its absorption policy and demonstration of power. Inner Mongolia was a site of violent clashes with police and the Chinese army in May 2011, as reported by Amnesty International and other human rights organizations in the region. The increased coal exploration in Inner Mongolia led to unexpected unrest among mostly cattle-breeding inhabitants in an otherwise politically submissive territory.

Central Asian republics arrive to the military drills with a baggage of their own. Currently, the most strenuous relationship in the SCO's present

antiterrorist exercise is that between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. For these republics, the joint exercise is complicated by the recent territorial disputes which involve continuous shoot-outs, casualties, mutual accusations, and inability to reach a border demarcation compromise. Only a few days before sending their troops to China, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan had yet another incident of lethal crossfire at the border with one Kyrgyz citizen killed and two arrested by a Tajik border patrol. Negotiations over the status of the Vorukh enclave in Kyrgyzstan, populated by ethnic Tajiks and a place of frequent ethnic clashes, are also stalled as the sides are unable to agree on the details of transportation communications between Vorukh and Tajikistan. Experiencing low-brewing separatist moods due to ethnical compositions and mutual territorial claims, the two republics enter the antiterrorist exercise with conflicting objectives mutual disaffection.

While sending its military units to China, Kazakhstan hosts military drills of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) code-named "Interaction - 2014" on August 18-22 at the military training ground "Spassk," involving up to 3,000 servicemen, 200 units of heavy armored vehicles and equipment, and 30 air force units. Russia, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan also participate in the CSTO military drills alongside the SCO's antiterrorist exercise. The purpose of this exercise is to practice an efficient response to external threats against CSTO members. As observed, SCO and CSTO have considerably increased

their military activity in light of recent international tensions over Ukraine and the Middle East.

The latest large-scale SCO antiterrorist exercises, "Peaceful Mission - 2012," took place in Tajikistan's "Chorukhdaron" military training ground in June 2012. Notably, Uzbekistan an SCO member, refrained from participating in previous and current "Peaceful Mission" exercises providing no explanations. At the same time, Uzbekistan conducted a similar yet smaller antiterrorist exercise with Kyrgyzstan in March 2014, coordination by SCO's executive committee.

For Beijing, the antiterrorist exercise is an important means for demonstrating to its subjects, such as Uighurs and ethnic Mongols, its ability to maintain and enforce territorial integrity, subordination, and order. Aside from the improvement of the People's Liberation Army's professional skills, the large-scale exercise aims to maintain its control over the general Chinese population by demonstrating power and military might.

BISHKEK DISTRICT COURTS FREE POLITICAL FIGURES CHARGED WITH CORRUPTION

Arslan Sabyrbekov

Recent court decisions in Kyrgyzstan to release and cancel the charges against a number of key political figures have turned into a major topic of dispute. Some Kyrgyz observers perceive these decisions to constitute a sign of weakness and a significant step backward in the fight against corruption. Others have continuously underlined the political nature of the anticorruption campaign and the judicial system's full dependency on the President, government and the parliament, despite a decade of judiciary reform.

On August 1, Bishkek's Pervomaisky District Court released former Speaker of Parliament Akhmatbek Keldibekov and allowed him to travel to Germany to obtain medical treatment. The Prosecutor General's Office opened the criminal case against Keldibekov on November 20, 2013. The outspoken opposition figure and member of the nationalist Ata-Jurt party, the single largest party in parliament, was arrested on charges of misappropriating public funds when he was the Chairman of the Social Fund in 2002-2005 and of the Central Tax Service Agency in 2008-2009. Keldibekov has continuously denied all the charges against him and described them as politically motivated.

From the early days of Keldibekov's arrest, his supporters, mostly based in

Kyrgyzstan's southern regions, have organized a number of large-scale demonstrations calling for his immediate release. Around 200 people have tried to storm the regional government building, throwing stones and bottles against police officers and blocking central roads connecting the country's regions. According to Bishkek-based political analyst Aalybek Akunov, it was the persistent protests in the south of the country that brought about Keldibekov's release, demonstrating that the central authorities in Bishkek will continue to encounter problems in extending their influence across the entire country. Akunov also believes that "the protests have turned into an essential bargaining tool with the central authorities in reaching this or that agreement."

Other political commentators describe this decision as the result of an informal consensus between the power holders and the opposition. According to them, Keldibekov was purposefully freed to obtain medical treatment abroad, so that he will simply stay there and not return to the Kyrgyzstan. This is especially favorable to the country's political elite in light of the upcoming parliamentary elections. It should also be noted that the Ata-Jurt party was earlier heavily weakened by the arrests of its other three prominent leaders, charged with attempting to violently

overthrow the government. All of them have been freed, but lost their seats in the parliament in accordance with the country's legislation.

Another Bishkek district court has passed a decision to cancel all charges against former Bishkek mayor Isa Omurkulov, who was earlier convicted for abuse of power and illegal approval of the boundaries of the "Victory" park. Omurkulov is a member of the pro-presidential ruling Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan and many believe that the case against him was simply opened to cool off the allegations that the fight against corruption is being carried out selectively and targeted only against prominent members of the opposition forces. Along with Omurkulov, charges were also dropped against four key members of his staff since, as the judge stated, "there was no basis for charging them with crimes."

In addition to the aforementioned cases, the Court has also freed the son of MP Turatbek Madylbekov, who was earlier charged with illegally selling state owned assets. A top manager in former President Kurmanbek Bakiev's team, Uchkun Tashbaev, has also been freed despite heavy charges that he exceeded his authority while heading the country's Agency for Geology and Mineral Resources. In the words of the opposition and independent MP Omurbek Abdrakhmanov, "all those decisions demonstrate that Kyrgyzstan is losing its battle against corruption. Individuals charged with heavy crimes are being freed. The fight has been declared just to fool the population and did not bring any substantive results."

At this stage, Nariman Tuleev, mayor of Bishkek during Bakiev's regime, remains the only prominent political figure serving his full sentence in one of the country's prisons.

ARMENIANS HOPE SOCHI MEETING WILL RELAX FRONTLINE TENSIONS

Erik Davtyan

On August 10, a trilateral meeting took place between the presidents of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. After the Kazan meeting in 2011, this was the first such meeting hosted by a Russian president. On August 8, Presidents Sargsyan and Aliyev had both paid a working visit to Sochi in order to discuss a wide range of issues, concerning Armenian-Russian and Azerbaijani-Russian relations respectively. Since both parties had expressed their willingness to hold a trilateral meeting, their official visits to Sochi presented a good opportunity for the dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The last meeting of the two presidents took place on November 19, 2013, in Vienna and was conducted with the participation of the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group and the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office Andrzej Kasprzyk.

The meeting focused on the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as the recent clashes on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border and the line of contact. While the working visit also pursued some other important issues (e.g. Armenian-Russian relations), the concerns among Armenia's population over the events on the borderline and the possibility of a state-level discussion of that situation became the main point of interest during the trilateral meeting. Many Armenians

attached great importance to the Sochi meeting due to the tense situation on the line of contact, which has since early August caused the deaths of over 20 soldiers. The recent skirmishes were the bloodiest fighting in two decades, and the proceedings at Sochi were therefore followed closely in Armenia.

In the first week of August, the developing situation on the frontline raised concerns among the Armenian public, fearing a possible escalation of the conflict. While clashes on the line of contact have occurred from time to time in past years, the massive breach of the cease-fire for a relatively long period of time, and the everyday news on the tense situation triggered perceptions that a return to large-scale military operations could be imminent. The death of 18 20-year-old soldiers in a week raised deep concerns among almost all Armenians, in Armenia as well as in the diaspora.

On August 7, President Aliyev's military rhetoric on Twitter raised additional concerns in Armenia. Aliyev stated that Azerbaijanis "have beaten the Armenians on the political and economic fronts," hence they "are able to defeat them on the battlefield." These statements, which were actually made on the level of president, were received with a deep anger among Armenia's population.

Both the borderline situation and Aliyev's statements received reactions from Armenia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and were widely covered in Armenian mass media. Moreover, the international reactions to the events served to further underline the seriousness of the situation. The U.S. Department of State and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs both expressed their stances towards the situation on the line of contact, which was one of the rare cases when the co-chairing states expressed their opinion not on the level of co-chairs, but foreign offices.

Russia's mediation attempt was largely in line with the expectations of the Armenian public. Hence, most Armenians welcomed the chance for a meeting between the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents. Despite the fact that Armenian society has an ambiguous attitude towards Russia and its relationship with Armenia, there was a relative unanimity towards the necessity of the Sochi meeting. Russia is considered to be Armenia's strategic partner, and to secure part of Armenia's state borders. Besides, Russia is one of the three members of the OSCE Minsk Group, as well as Armenia's most significant arms supplier.

As the working visits of the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents started on August 8, some Armenian experts are inclined to link that circumstance with the 6th anniversary of the August war between Russia and Georgia, thereby implying that there is an indirect message to Georgia's neighboring states, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Nevertheless, the Sochi meeting drew the attention of Armenia's population primarily due to its consequences for the acute situation on the frontline, rather than the prospects for approaching solutions to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict itself. Therefore, this meeting, followed by a 10-month pause, largely satisfied the expectations of the Armenian public.