GEORGIA: RUSSIA PLANS THREE MILITARY BASES IN ABKHAZIA

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Back in 1991, it may be recalled, Soviet troops attempted a crackdown in the Baltic state of Lithuania on the very day that US military forces opened its aerial bombing campaign during the first Iraq War. Now, Moscow is at it again, striving to act while Washington seems preoccupied.

At a time when US troops are gearing up for a surge in Afghanistan, and while a controversy is continuing over the fate of a US air base in Kyrgyzstan, the Kremlin seems to be harboring mischievous plans for the Black Sea and Caucasus.

Reports in Russian media outlets over the past few weeks indicate that Moscow plans to establish a Black Sea naval base in the Abkhaz port of Ochamchire. In addition, Moscow intends to restore the former Soviet airbase -- Bombora -- in the Gudauta area of Abkhazia.

Ochamchire is some 60 kilometers south-east of the Abkhaz capital of Sukhumi, near the ceasefire line established in the aftermath of the last August’s war with Georgia. When stationed there, Russian ships would essentially control the Georgian territorial waters all the way to the Turkish border.

The Georgian ports of Poti and Batumi would be within easy striking distance from the planned base in Ochamchire, giving Russia a chip with which it could intimidate Georgia for years to come.

Russian military representatives purport that a "threat of diversions and terrorist attacks by Georgian special services" offers justification for the establishment of military bases in the breakaway province of Abkhazia. Yet, the pending bases raise questions about Moscow’s motivation for the August 2008 war, as well as the Kremlin’s decision Abkhazia’s independence. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive].

In the next few months, the Abkhaz separatist leadership expects to sign a treaty with Moscow, agreeing to host this Ochamchire naval base, as well as a base for land forces -- including alpine special forces -- in the Kodori Gorge, along with a proposed Air Force base in the Gudauta area.

During the Cold War, the Soviet military presence in the Georgian province of Abkhazia, located close to NATO member Turkey, was seen as an important strategic piece in the broad puzzle that was the Soviet-NATO confrontation.

Ochamchire has a history of serving as a Soviet naval base. Starting in 1923, it hosted the Batumi Black Sea border ship detachment. In 1967, it became the base of the 6th separate border patrol brigade, which was relocated -- on Georgia’s demand -- to the Caspian port of Kaspiisk (Dagestan, Russia) in 1996. Most recently, during the August war in Georgia, it was Ochamchire where the Russian warships arrived and the marines landed before moving on into Georgia.

Should plans proceed as expected, the Russians will have to build up the Ochamchire base, including full coastal infrastructure for maintenance and supply of the ships, practically from scratch. This may take
several years and billions of dollars. The construction work in Ochamchire, including dredging, is to start this year. Currently, the harbor channel has a heavy buildup of silt and averages only 3.8 meters in depth.

In the Soviet era, warships in Ochamchire included border patrol boats, mine-sweepers, and tugboats. Sometimes small anti-submarine and landing ships entered the port, while large warships and cruisers remained off-shore due to the shallow waters in the harbor. Analysts expect a similar mix of ships in the new base.

Dredging, however, may allow the expanded base to accommodate larger landing ships. Nevertheless, the main forces of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, such as the missile cruiser Moscow or the large anti-submarine ships Kerch and Ochakov will not be able to enter Ochamchire.

Russia is clearly trying to strengthen and extend its military power abroad. Yet, one should remember another motive. The agreement allowing Russia’s Black Sea Fleet to stay in Sevastopol expires in 2017. Ukrainian politicians have not been able to reach a final decision on whether to terminate or extend the lease. The situation gives Moscow every reason to look for additional Black See bases -- especially in areas where their hosts promise to be more pro-Russian than Ukraine. Relations these days between Moscow and Kyiv are not exactly tight, a fact underscored by the recent and prolonged spat over natural gas supplies. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive].

Clearly, Ochamchire is not a viable alternative to Sevastopol as the main Black Sea naval base. It is shallow, relatively small and does not have a protected bay. Nevertheless, Ochamchire may serve as a key forward supply base for the Russian warships, seaborne Spetsnaz and naval infantry deployed in the Black Sea region.

The Bombora air base near Gudauta is another story. It is the largest military airfield in the Southern Caucasus, boasting a 4-kilometer long runway, thus making it a strategically coveted facility. The runway ends less than 100 meters from the sea, allowing aircraft to take off at very low altitudes over the sea and proceed undetected by enemy radar in the initial phases of flight.

In the Soviet era, the Gudauta air base could accommodate all types of military aircraft, including fighter jets, close-air support craft, and heavy military transport. The air base used to host a separate paratroops regiment and was among the first airbases to receive the Soviet Sukhoi-27 fighter jets (NATO designation -- Flanker). Sukhoi fighters also operated out of Bombora against Georgian troops and aircraft in the 1992-1993 Georgian-Abkhaz war. At that time, the Russian military ran the base.

In 1999, President Boris Yeltsin committed Russia to withdrawing from the Gudauta base. In 2001, Moscow declared that it had done so -- a claim Tbilisi has contested continuously. According to Gazeta.ru, the Abkhazian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has indirectly confirmed the presence of the Russian aircraft in Gudauta, even after the alleged withdrawal.

In the recent 2008 conflict, Russian airborne troops, which fought against the Georgian army in western Georgia, landed in Bombora.
Regardless of whether the Russian military ever fully left the airbase or not, there is no question that Moscow is now officially returning. According to a source in the Russian Ministry of Defense, Moscow plans to deploy some 20 aircraft, including a wing of the Su-27s (Flanker), a squadron of the Su-25s (Frogfoot) attack aircraft, and several An-26 (Curl) transport aircraft. The same source identifies "deterrence of Georgia" as the main mission of the base. Moscow also claims that the restored airbase in Abkhazia is necessary to provide proper security for the 2014 Sochi Olympics.

The likely deployment of Russian naval, air, and land power, including some 3,700 troops, in separatist Abkhazia would pose new security threats to Georgia’s sovereignty. Proceeding with the plan at this time would cause a deterioration of relations between Russia and the European Union and the United States, as well as further poison the ties between Moscow and Tbilisi.

NATO is already voicing concern over the new bases. US and EU representatives have accused Russia of violating the Georgian ceasefire agreement, which called for limiting Russia’s military presence in Abkhazia after the August 2008 war. Russia, in turn, accuses the United States of supporting Tbilisi and aiding in the reconstruction and development of Georgia’s military capabilities.

With additional warships, fighter aircraft, and military personnel near the Black Sea coast of Georgia, Russia is challenging the position of the United States, which has recently signed a Strategic Partnership Charter with Tbilisi. In the summer of 2008, American warships were still able to enter the Georgian waters to deliver humanitarian aid for the war victims. The question is: What will happen in the future? Could there be a US-Russian naval standoff in the Black Sea someday?

Washington is supporting Georgia’s sovereignty and is interested in the security of strategic oil and gas transportation routes from the Caspian basin to the west (particularly, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline). The three new Russian military bases in Abkhazia will change the balance of power in the region. They will strengthen Moscow’s military stance and likely terminate Tbilisi’s efforts to restore Georgia’s territorial integrity. The Obama administration is going to have to do a lot of thinking in the coming months about how to handle Russia.

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