Russian Attack on Georgia: Time to Speak Out

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Four months ago today, Russian military helicopters snaked through the Caucasus Mountain passes that lead from Russia to Georgia to attack Upper Abkhazia. Also known as the Upper Kodori Gorge, this is the only part of the breakaway Georgian province of Abkhazia controlled by the Tbilisi Government. The aerial assault was complemented by ground-to-ground rockets, likely fired from territory controlled by the Russian-backed de facto authorities that control most of Abkhazia. The United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) is about to release its report. The report deserves close attention—then the world must speak out.

Three months ago, this column presaged the UNOMIG report, saying, “At best, the UN document will record the details—debris found, witness accounts, etc….The document will not draw any politically sensitive conclusions.” Now UNOMIG’s official conclusion is inconclusive, but the staff drafted the best report possible, considering the requirement for consensus with representatives of Russia and the de facto Abkhaz authorities in the Joint Fact-finding Group. UNOMIG did an excellent job of gathering and analyzing facts—and laying some clear indications between the lines.

Maybe the Russian representatives were too coarse to notice; maybe they were too callous to care. Either way, the attentive reader will glean a lot from the UNOMIG report.

The report documents—without comment, of course—that Georgia cooperated fully with the UN investigation, while Russia obstructed it at every turn. The U.N. team asked the Russian Federation to provide air traffic control records for the area and time in question. Moscow replied, “Since there were no Russian Air Force flights on March 11-12 in the mentioned zone, there are no recordings of such flights.”

Equally telling, UNOMIG asked the Russian Federation to trace the serial numbers found on munitions fragments, particularly on remnants of the Russian-manufactured anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) that struck the first floor of the regional administration building in Chkhalta. The U.N. received no reply from Moscow!

The report proceeds to tell its story through implicit deductions about what happened on the night of March 11. For example, UNOMIG writes, “Except for statements from a majority of witnesses in the Upper Kodori Valley, no further evidence positively and conclusively denies or affirms the presence of helicopters during the incident.” In other words, except for the evidence, there is no further evidence—such self-contradiction from intelligent people must be a message.

Scores of witnesses heard helicopters that evening—that is evidence. The people of Upper Abkhazia may not be qualified aircraft spotters, but they are presumably smart enough to distinguish between something flying above them and, say, a logging truck, a Lada or a horse-
drawn cart. Moreover, a Georgian helicopter crew on the ground at the time identified one of the helicopters as an Mi-24—they fly an Mi-8, precursor to the Mi-24, so are presumably qualified to know what they saw.

Then UNOMIG presents the supposedly inexistent further evidence: “The missile appears to have entered the building from a relatively high angle,” an angle only a helicopter could achieve.

In a further self-contradictory twist, although the report is inconclusive about whether helicopters were involved at all, it provides rich hypothetical details about how the helicopters carried out the attack! Terrain and weather made tough flying conditions that night; conditions only Russian pilots and equipment could surmount. By the way, the Soviets used Mi-8s and Mi-24s extensively in mountainous Afghanistan. Considering fuel consumption, Mi-24s could not have loitered for the entire time that witnesses reported helicopters to have been in the area. However, writes UNOMIG, they could have come and gone sequentially or refueled at an improvised location. Why such painstaking analysis of an occurrence that is neither denied nor affirmed?

As for the artillery fire, UNOMIG reports finding 16 impact craters, 12 of which it attributes to 122mm 9M22 rockets. Circumstances rule out man-portable or improvised single launch systems, so the rockets must have come from a BM-21 Grad multiple launch rocket system aboard a Ural truck. The exact launch point could not be determined, but UNOMIG rules out both maximum-range and close-range fire. That leaves medium-range fire in perfect timing with the Russian helicopter assault. The implicit deduction is that the launch point was in territory controlled by the de facto Abkhaz authorities.

So, the UNOMIG staff deserves a big hurrah, but we do not now have more fundamental information than we did within days of the attack. Between the hours of 2110 and 2300 on March 11, the villages of Adjara, Chkhalta and Zima came under ground-to-ground rocket attack. More than one probable Mi-24 helicopter was in the area throughout the attack. The assault culminated at 2247 when one of the helicopters launched an AT-6 Shturm or AT-9 Ataka ATGM into a building in Chkhalta.

All other possibilities ruled out by logical deduction, the Russians did it.

The Russian helicopter hop into Georgia was downright weird, but in the Caucasus, truth is stranger than fiction. And Moscow excels in bizarre behavior that can only be understood with willful suspension of disbelief—dioxin poisoning, assassination by irradiation and defenestration, mysterious gas pipeline explosions, etc. Wackiness is part of the plan—Moscow delivers its message, plausibly denying any involvement. Western countries receive the message, but the entire thing is so weird that they can plausibly deny having seen anything amiss.

When UNOMIG officially delivers its report, western governments must decide whether to look away or to draw the inferences that the report implies.

Pessimistically, last April, this column presaged the western choice, saying, “Do not now expect the west to mount a robust response to the March 11 attack. The delay will have had a soporific effect on western foreign ministries.” Let us hope that the springtime assessment was incorrect.

We will know within days after official release of the UNOMIG report. During the investigation, keeping cool and quiet was the right demeanor. Had Georgia and its western friends raised a premature diplomatic ruckus, it might have derailed the investigation, enabling Moscow to point
an accusatory finger at Tbilisi. But keeping calm in the first instance presumes the courage to speak out when the report is done.

Well, the report is done. Now Georgia will no doubt seek to raise the March 11 attack on Upper Abkhazia in the U.N. Security Council. It should have the unequivocal support of the western countries, particularly the Permanent Members of the Council, France, the United Kingdom and the United States. For the same reason that there could not be a more explicit UNOMIG report, there can be no formal action in the Security Council—Russia would veto it. Nonetheless, there should be a thorough airing of the matter and Moscow should hear a clear, simple message—we know you did it and it is unacceptable.

Otherwise, Moscow will understand that the western countries will tolerate its brand of international juvenile delinquency. “If Russia thinks it can bomb Georgian territory and get away with it, that is dangerous not just for Georgia, but for all its neighbors—for Ukraine, for Azerbaijan, for the Baltic States,” Georgian Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili told the Wall Street Journal. Eventually this kind of Russian behavior will ignite a blaze somewhere in the former Soviet space that the western countries cannot ignore.

Therefore, the western countries must speak out now about the Russian attack on Upper Abkhazia. If they equivocate, they should expect more things to go whir, bang and crash in the night!

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