



საგარეო საკითხებისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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**RUSSIA'S NEW MILITARY DOCTRINE NEXUS WITH
HER TREATIES ON ALLIANCE WITH ABKHAZIA
AND SOUTH OSSETIA**

KAKHA GOGOLASHVILI

EXPERT OPINION



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The publication is made possible with the support of the US Embassy in Georgia.

Editor: Jeffrey Morski
Technical Editor: Artem Melik-Nubarov

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ISSN 1512-4835
ISBN 978-9941-0-7591-9

In late December 2014, the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation (hereinafter the Doctrine) was published. It is noteworthy that the last such document was adopted in 2010 after the Georgia-Russia war. The need for a new Doctrine was ostensibly prompted by the armed confrontation with Ukraine. However, certain provisions of the Doctrine harbor direct or indirect threats for Georgia. The present work will attempt to focus on precisely these threats. Along with the measures identified for the prevention and restraint of military conflicts, the new Russian Military Doctrine, among other passages, includes “cooperation with the Republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia for the purpose of ensuring joint defense and security.”¹ It is noteworthy that the new Doctrine implies the use of military forces by the Russian Federation in a number of cases, including:

1. Protection of its citizens living outside the borders of the Russian Federation.²
2. Cases when “armed attacks” or “any other actions involving the use of military force are undertaken against the ‘allied states.’”³

The *first reason* raises considerable doubts about the rightfulness of its status in international law; however, the Doctrine tenaciously keeps on making references to its “compliance” with international norms. In addition, the Doctrine lists the above action among the tasks that Russian armed forces face during peacetime, meaning that Russia is entitled to use its military force on the territory of another country in order to defend its own citizens and it may not qualify this as a warlike situation. To this end, the streamlined procedures for awarding Russian citizenship⁴ as laid down in the Treaties⁵ with Abkhazia and South Ossetia developed in November-December 2014 suggest a number of questions. In the case of wide application of such an opportunity, the majority of the region’s citizens will become full-fledged citizens of Russia and their protection will be one of the direct tasks of the Russian armed forces.

The *second reason*, notably the use of military force beyond the borders of the Russian Federation as a response to aggression against an allied state, also requires a thorough analysis. The most suggestive is the fact

1 The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, 2014, Articles 21(i). See: www.news.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d527556bec8deb3530.pdf

2 *Ibid.*, Articles 22 and 32(o).

3 *Ibid.*, Article 24.

4 Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Abkhazia on Alliance and Strategic Partnership, 2014, Article 13. See: www.kremlin.ru/ref_notes/4783

5 The Treaty was signed with Abkhazia in December 2014. A similar agreement will be signed in the nearest future with South Ossetia.

that the adoption of the new Doctrine coincided in time with the signing of the Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership with Abkhazia and South Ossetia; that is to say, the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia now precisely corresponds to the term used in the new Doctrine – “allies.” In addition, the term “aggression” is not limited to a military attack undertaken against the “sovereign territory” of the allies of the Russian Federation. The Doctrine qualifies aggression as any act undertaken against “the allied states...” “...during which military force is used.”⁶ The latter definition was introduced to justify the use of Russian military force even in cases when there is no eventual fact of “aggression,” such as intrusion into the territory of another state, etc., but there exists some military confrontation between the allies of Russia and a third country.

What should this vague definition signify?

Russia is planning to defend its allies even in cases when the confrontation takes place at the border (dividing line) or even on the territory of the third party (Georgia proper). We can simply imagine that the conflict escalates at the dividing line between South Ossetia and Georgia proper and both parties are involved in shooting. Based on the adopted Doctrine, Russian military forces consider the situation as *casus belli* and become involved in military actions against Georgia. Moreover, in accordance with the Doctrine, even if Georgia repels the military attacks undertaken by the puppet Government of South Ossetia on the territory of the former, Georgian military forces may become the target of Russian army attack since the Doctrine considers any use of military force against the allies of Russia (without detailing the place of confrontation) as aggression and retains the right to defend them from the “aggressor.” Article 34 of the Doctrine, which practically summarizes the regulations established by the said Doctrine for the use of military force during war, states that the “Principal objectives of the armed forces (of the Russian Federation) are to repel aggression directed against the Russian Federation and its allies, to defeat the military forces of the aggressor and to compel the latter to terminate military action on the conditions which respond to the interests of the Russian Federation and its allies.”⁷ This provision, in and of itself, indicates that Russia virtually does not differentiate between the defense of its own interests and territory and that of its allies. No procedures of any kind are mentioned – for instance, an allied country’s request for assistance. Russian armed forces will

6 The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, 2014, Article 24. See: www.news.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d527556bec8deb3530.pdf

7 *Ibid.*, Article 34.

launch military operations against an “aggressor” without delay whenever they deem it essential. The Doctrine contains numerous other items which indirectly highlight these objectives; e.g., whereas Paragraph 12 discusses principal military threats including, for instance: “...the approximation of the infrastructure of NATO member states to the borders of the Russian Federation, including by means of further expansion of NATO;” “foreign military buildup or mobilization in countries neighboring the Russian Federation or its allies;” “territorial claims directed at the Russian Federation or its allies;” “hotbeds of conflict and tension in countries adjacent to the Russian Federation...” and “the establishment of regimes in neighboring countries..., whose policies pose a threat to Russia’s national interests.” It is clear that the majority of these provisions are associated with Georgia which, accordingly, summons the Russian armed forces to its borders – in other words, for Russia to mobilize an appropriate number of combat-capable troops at full combat readiness in this “potentially hazardous strategic area...,”⁸ Russia does not need to involve the Abkhazian and, all the more, the South Ossetian army at all in such provocations. In accordance with the Treaties signed with the Republics,⁹ Russia and its “new allies and strategic partners” have joint armed forces.¹⁰ In the case of South Ossetia, the armed forces unite unconditionally as specified in the planned Treaty while in the case of Abkhazia, such unification should be nominally preceded by a “threat of aggression”¹¹ recognized by the parties whose “conclusion” will not present a substantial challenge for them once it becomes essential for the implementation of Russian plans.

One more additional, although hypothetical, threat is that neither Abkhazia nor South Ossetia, whose independence has been recognized by Russia, **has internationally recognized borders, among them with Georgia which they consider a neighboring country.** On the one hand, it creates some advantages for us regarding the strengthening of our territorial integrity at the international level; however, on the other hand, this situation may be used by Russia to enact “creeping occupation.” Namely, any new claims on the territory of the rest of Georgia by the South Ossetian puppet government can be met by the immediate incursion of their military subunits and if the Georgian army attempts to restore the *status quo*, Russian military forces will consider it their obligation, and will even receive an

8 The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, 2014, Article 32. See: www.news.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d527556bec8deb3530.pdf

9 The Treaty with South Ossetia will be signed in late January.

10 The Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Abkhazia on Alliance and Strategic Partnership, 2014, Article 5.

11 *Ibid.*, Article 7, Paragraph 2.

order, to defend “the allies against the use of military force.” The Government of the Russian Federation will purpose the following arguments to ensure a political justification of the above actions:

1. Russia recognizes Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states.
2. These states do not have delimited borders with Georgia.
3. Georgia does not recognize the independence of the states and, respectively, does not hold any negotiations with them.
4. Territorial disputes arisen due to the above reasons acquire the essentiality of a conflict.
5. Conflict escalation was transformed into an armed confrontation.
6. It is the responsibility of Russia to curb the use of the military power of the third party against its allies and “introduce a limited contingent on a temporary basis” into the zone of current military confrontation.

The “zone” may easily acquire the extent that will allow Russia to occupy Georgian regions through which Russian armed forces will be able to reach Armenia via South Ossetia that will resolve Russia’s primary strategic goal. Alternatively, as a result of involvement in a provoked conflict with the Abkhazian puppet regime, Russia will conduct the occupation of the ports of Anaklia (still under construction) and Poti. Subsequently, the Russian Government will call upon the Georgian Government to hold negotiations with Russia’s allied regimes and resolve territorial disputes in a peaceful manner. This will be a deadlock; that is to say, a new *status quo* in which Georgia, as a whole and united state, can only survive under Russia’s rule (and in the best scenario at that).

Similar scenarios can be examined in different directions using more “sophisticated” combinations on which we will not elaborate in order to avoid unsubstantiated speculation. We will rest on the fact that the spirit and logic of the Russian Military Doctrine similarly applies to the member states of its *Collective Security Treaty Organization*. Ergo, any political and, especially, military confrontation with the members of this group may also be used to justify Russia’s aggression against us.

Of course, these are just hypotheses but the threat that they may be confirmed is unquestionably realistic.

Let us consider whether or not Russia has motives for such actions.

The answer is positive: Russia gained its strategic advantage over Georgia when in 2008 it occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia, retained its military

base in Armenia and secured the right to remain there for multiple years. By doing so, Russia disparaged Georgia's attractiveness for NATO. However, Russia failed to "dissociate" Azerbaijan from Turkey or "block" the corridor connecting Western states with the Caspian Sea region; it also failed to set a veto on the southward expansion of NATO or to exclude the possibility of establishing a US military base in Georgia. These constitute just an insignificant part of the challenges that Russia is planning to address in the future and reference to the Treaty with Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the above context clears the way for wide choices for Russia.

It goes without saying that Russia will violate international norms if it uses the above approaches. Therefore, does it make any sense for Russia to use such "devious paths?" *Why can it not just openly attack Georgia?*

In order to find the answer to this question, we will have to once again look into the Russian Military Doctrine which, in almost every chapter related to the use of military force, states that "this will be done with full observance of **international norms and principles and international treaties signed by the Russian Federation.**" As concerns international norms and principles, Russia has been offering its own interpretation to the international community for a long time. Hence, Russia cannot be stopped by international law if the conditions of its violations allow for varying interpretations. However, direct and unsubstantiated aggression cannot be justified by any state, even those presently "standing aside." Currently, the West has isolated Russia due to its annexation of Crimea but Russia does not want to find itself in total isolation from other actors (China, India, Brazil, etc.); nevertheless, even those actors will have to take this position if the Russian Federation proceeds to commit one more direct and armed aggression against a sovereign state.

As for the second part (international treaties) of the given provision – the Russian Federation has already signed a number of treaties that do not comply with the norms and principles of international law and any of Russia's actions may contradict either the first or the second condition. Russian legislation does not contain any explanation that would state which condition prevails (international treaty or the norms of international law); therefore, the Russian Government will consider as legitimate any action that will comply with either. We suppose that our readers may very well understand which one that might be...

The only "positive circumstance" which can be observed while reading the Doctrine is the fact that Russia will resort to the use of nuclear weapons for preventive measures only to avoid an existential threat to its statehood; namely, in the case of its opponent defeating Russia using conventional

weapons, for instance, or if, as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, fighting between the adversaries shifts to the Russian soil. This provision of the Doctrine does not apply to situations arising from the need to protect its allies. Thus, theoretically, we are not facing the threat of a nuclear attack from Russia even if we manage to return control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia by force of arms.

Finally, we can summarize that:

- Russian Alliance Treaties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia are in full conformity with the new Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation.
- Compliance of the Doctrine and Treaties, with high probability, creates the basis for further aggression against Georgia and for the commitment of such aggression.
- Effective implementation of such opportunities will become possible in the case of a relevant international situation and the puppet Governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (separately or together) will be used to create grounds and form a pretext for committing aggression against Georgia.