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International Community Condemns Russia's Brazen Violation of Georgian Airspace; Role as Peacekeeper in Jeopardy

NATO: "These actions raise questions about Russia's role as peacekeeper & facilitator of negotiations;" Russian military exercises on Georgian border raise further threats

NATO, the OSCE, and others have condemned Russia's intentional violation of Georgian airspace last week, a provocative act of brinkmanship that has further heightened tensions in the South Caucasus. Moscow yesterday maintained its bellicose posture by undertaking massive military exercises just north of Georgia, dubbing them "peace enforcement operations."

The United Nations Security Council, meanwhile, announced yesterday that it would convene on July 21 to address Russia's admission of violating Georgian airspace. On Monday, a special session of the OSCE Permanent Council also discussed the incursion into Georgia by the Russian military jets.

Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, NATO Secretary-General, said yesterday via a spokesman that he was "troubled by Russia's statement that its military aircraft deliberately overflew Georgian territory in violation of its territorial integrity." Added De Hoop Scheffer: "These actions raise questions about Russia's role as peacekeeper and facilitator of negotiations."

The US State Department echoed NATO's concern. "We are deeply troubled by Russia's statement that its military aircraft deliberately violated Georgia's internationally recognized borders," it said in statement, adding that Russian activities in Georgia "raise questions about Russia's role as peacekeeper and facilitator of the negotiations" in Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

On July 10, Russia acknowledged that its fighters had intentionally violated Georgian airspace the previous day in order "to cool hot heads in Tbilisi." Four Russian jets remained above Georgia for approximately 40 minutes. Moscow routinely denies encroaching on Georgian airspace, despite radar and eyewitness evidence of frequent violations. On April 20, a Russian MiG shot down a Georgian drone over Georgian airspace, an act confirmed by the UN observer Mission in Georgia and by the OSCE. Last August, a Russian MiG dropped a missile on Georgia that failed to explode; two independent investigations by international experts confirmed Russia's responsibility for the missile incident.

However, last week's episode marked the first time in a decade that Russia acknowledged an airspace violation.

The incident occurred on the eve of a visit to Tbilisi by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. This underscored Moscow's apparent intention to signal its displeasure at Georgia's turn to democracy and the West. This latest in a series of increasingly aggressive acts also has prompted a spate of editorials.

In its lead editorial on 16 July, the Financial Times wrote that the message to the west from the airspace violations was "brutally clear: stay off our turf." Continued the FT: "It is a message the US and the European Union must not accept. Russia is not interested in Abkhazia and South Ossetia per se... But Moscow is very interested in stopping Georgia developing as a pro-west state—and blocking its bid to join NATO. The west must be equally determined to help Tbilisi follow its chosen course."

On Tuesday, former senior Clinton Administration official Ron Asmus wrote in the Washington Post that "critical principles, including sovereignty and territorial integrity, are at stake" in Georgia. "Russia is seeking to redefine the rules of post-Cold War European security to its advantage," he said. "If we don't try to stop Russia's overstepping, countries in the region—from Azerbaijan to Central Asian energy producers—will recalculate accordingly."

On Tuesday, meanwhile, Russia launched large-scale military exercises in the immediate vicinity of Georgia's northern border. The Russian Defense Ministry claimed that the exercises, involving over 8,000 troops and 700 pieces of military hardware, were aimed at preparing for "special peace enforcement operations" in the Georgian regions of Abkhazia, and South Ossetia.

The commander of Russia's North Caucasian Military District, S. Makarov, said that "his troops are ready to assist peacekeepers." Nowhere in the UN and OSCE endorsed peacekeeping mandate for the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is any outside force foreseen. The Georgian foreign ministry denounced the statements of Russian commanders, in tandem with the exercises, as an implicit threat of aggression against Georgia.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Georgia Update on Russian Airspace Violations (July 10)

http://www.president.gov.ge/PDF/GU_E_2008-07-10_121577330033148.pdf

Full text of Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement:

http://www.mfa.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=36&info_id=7062

Financial Times: Editorial, "Stand up to Russia over Georgia" (July 16)

http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a4ad5d08-5294-11dd-9ba7-000077b07658.html?nclick_check=1

Washington Post: Analysis, "A War The West Must Stop" (July 15)

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/07/14/AR2008071401845.html>