

*The American Interest, Summer 2010
Vol. V, No. 5*

Toolbox: Georgia's Territorial Integrity
Alexander Cooley & Lincoln Mitchell

ACTION MEMORANDUM

TO: Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates

FROM: Alexander Cooley & Lincoln Mitchell

DATE: May 1, 2010

SUBJECT: Georgia's Territorial Integrity

Since the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008, the United States and the European Union have adamantly, and justifiably, refused to accept Russia's postwar recognition of the declared independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, Washington and Brussels have failed, together and separately, to develop a realistic strategy toward the breakaway territories that takes changed political dynamics into account. Indeed, we do not have a workable policy at all; we have platitudes stuck in amber that ignore reality. The core realities we must acknowledge are, first, that these territories are almost certainly lost to Georgia, possibly for decades, and second, that Russian influence in both places has increased rapidly and substantially. Unless the United States changes its approach, the Russian Federation will soon completely absorb Abkhazia and South Ossetia. To prevent that outcome, we, together with the European Union, need urgently to end the current policy of isolation with respect to these territories and replace it with one of "engagement without recognition."

Abkhazia First

Abkhazia and South Ossetia are almost always joined together in the minds of policymakers and observers, but there are major differences between the two. An independent Abkhazia is at least theoretically plausible, and reflects the desire of most current residents. Although its population is only about 180,000, the territory possesses a long Black Sea coastline that could facilitate contacts with countries other than Russia; there are some natural resource endowments and a set of governing institutions. Recently characterized as "partly free" by Freedom House, Abkhazia already has some attributes of statehood. South Ossetia, with a population of less than 50,000 people, is by contrast landlocked between Georgia and Russia, and the population's resentment of local Georgians has led it to imagine not independence, but rather a protective autonomy within Russia. Thus, for practical reasons, we need to focus our efforts on Abkhazia.