



# The Evolutionary Russian View of Peacekeeping as Part of Modern Warfare

by Matthew Stein

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Russia views peacekeeping operations as a part of warfare, specifically that they can be utilized to achieve strategic objectives beyond conflict resolution
- Russia's past peacekeeping operations have shown how these involved ending the conflict as quickly as possible and enforcing terms of any cease-fire agreement, including taking action that favored one of the belligerents as long as Russia remains in the dominant position
- Russia's Nagorno-Karabakh peacekeeping operation ended a conflict and helped the Russian government maintain influence in the Commonwealth of Independent States with a Russian military detachment in place for the foreseeable future, which can help explain how conflicts involving Russia are likely to end

## INTRODUCTION

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War stood out as a significant chapter in the history of the conflict in the region. Not only did Azerbaijan take control over a large amount of territory, the Russian government deployed peacekeepers as part of the cease-fire agreement between the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan. This marked the first time a peacekeeping force became involved in the conflict over the region and stood as another example of how Russia utilized a peacekeeping operation as a response to a conflict

in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The CIS is made up of states of the former Soviet Union and is an area where the Russian government has special relationships and a sphere of influence. While the United States has arguably pulled back from peacekeeping operations in recent years and, as a result, the U.S. military has deemphasized them, Russia views peacekeeping operations as a key part of modern warfare. Like other military operations, Russians consider that peacekeeping operations can be utilized to achieve

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strategic objectives beyond conflict resolution. This article examines how Russia views peacekeeping operations as a part of warfare, including in its military doctrine and based on past conflicts in the CIS. It also examines how this applies to the most recent conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and in the peacekeeping operation as a response to civil unrest in Kazakhstan. Insights from this may also inform potential outcomes of the current war in Ukraine.

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## A RUSSIAN VIEW OF PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS

There are several sources that help gauge the contemporary Russian military view of peacekeeping in terms of warfare. The Russian Military Doctrine, the latest version of which was published in December 2014, mentions peacekeeping operations in a few different contexts. Under “Section III, Military Policy of the Russian Federation,” there are three subsections that mention peacekeeping:

- In the subsection “The Activities of the Russian Federation to Deter and Prevent Military Conflicts,” one the main tasks to deter and prevent conflicts includes “participating in international peacekeeping activities, including under the auspices of the United Nations and in the framework of cooperation with international (regional) organizations”
- In the subsection “Employment of the Armed Forces, other troops and bodies, and their main tasks in peacetime under the conditions of an imminent threat of aggression and in wartime,” there are a couple of points on how the Russian Armed Forces might be used, including that “The Russian Federation shall provide military contingents for the CSTO peacekeeping forces

to participate in peacekeeping operations as decided upon by the CSTO Collective Security Council,” that “The Russian Federation shall also provide military contingents for the CSTO Collective Rapid Reaction Forces and the Collective Rapid Deployment Forces of the Central Asia Collective Security Region to promptly respond to military threats to CSTO member states and accomplish other tasks assigned by the CSTO Collective Security Council,” that “The Russian Federation shall provide military contingents for peacekeeping operations mandated by the UN or the CIS in accordance with the procedure established by the federal legislation and international treaties of the Russian Federation,” and how Russian forces could “participate in peacekeeping operations to maintain (restore) international peace and security, to take measures to avert (eliminate) threats to peace, and to suppress acts of aggression (violation of peace) on the basis of decisions of the UN Security Council or other bodies authorized to adopt such decisions in accordance with international law”

- In the subsection “Military-political and military-technical cooperation of the Russian Federation with foreign states,” a few of the tasks of the military-political cooperation include a point “to develop relations with international organizations for the prevention of conflict situations and maintenance and strengthening of peace in various regions, including with the participation of Russian military contingents in peacekeeping operations” and a couple of points under the main priorities of military-political cooperation that outline activities Russian forces will be involved with, including “with the CIS member states—ensuring regional and international security and carrying out peacekeeping operations” and “with the

United Nations and other international, including regional, organizations—involving representatives of the Armed Forces, other troops and bodies in the management of peacekeeping operations and in the process of planning and carrying out preparatory activities for operations aimed at maintaining (restoring) peace, as well as in participating in the elaboration, coordination, and implementation of international agreements on arms control and strengthening international security and increasing the participation of units and servicemen of the Armed Forces, other troops and bodies in operations aimed at maintaining (restoring) peace”<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the military doctrine, General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, wrote articles and made presentations at the Russian Academy of Military Science regarding the evolution of warfare and military operations.<sup>2</sup> Gerasimov noted a couple of ways on how a peacekeeping operation can be utilized, including:

- Deploying peacekeepers “under the pretext of the defense of human rights and humanitarian operations as part of an asymmetric operation” from an article published in the *Journal of the Academy of Military Science in 2013*<sup>3</sup>
- Using peacekeeping as a military method within the category of new trends in the character of war at a presentation at the Academy of Military Science in 2013, where he also used the term “new-type military conflicts”<sup>4</sup>

Gerasimov is not the only author to publish in the *Journal of the Academy of Military Science* on the topic of different types of warfare. Oleg Gorshechnikov, the head of the Scientific Research Section of Military History at the Military Academy of the General Staff, and his colleagues Aleksandr

Malyshev and Yuriy Pivovarov, wrote an article on what they see as the characteristics of modern military conflicts. They state that there are three types of military conflicts, each with a different goal. They mention peacekeeping, with a goal of achieving peace through the use of armed forces as a third side in a conflict, alongside the characteristics of aggressive (a threat to peace or an act of aggression) and liberating (defending against aggression, individual or collective).<sup>5</sup> While these are the most recent published Russian military perspectives on peacekeeping, it is worth examining how past conflicts in the CIS have influenced the Russian view of peacekeeping operations.

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## RUSSIA’S EXPERIENCES WITH PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS

How the Russian military views peacekeeping operations does not strictly come from its latest military doctrine or the previously mentioned articles, but is also drawn from its experience with peacekeeping operations in and out of the CIS. This includes peacekeeping operations in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Tajikistan beginning in the early 1990s. In addition to this, the Russian armed forces took part in the UN peacekeeping operation UNPROFOR and then with the NATO-led forces in the Balkans in the 1990s, and annually provide contributions of personnel to various UN peacekeeping operations around the world. The detailed history of the conflicts and peacekeeping operations in each of these regions is beyond the scope of this article, but there are some aspects of each that provide insight how the Russian armed forces came to view and carry out peacekeeping relevant to today, as evident in their approach to the operation in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Before looking at a selective history of peacekeeping operations in the CIS, it is important to note the Russian perspective of peacekeeping since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Soviet leadership provided limited or no support to UN peacekeeping operations prior to the late 1980s. Soviet support consisted of providing air transport or sending a group of observers to a few UN peacekeeping operation.<sup>6</sup> It was not until after the collapse of the Soviet Union that the Russian government took a more active role in peacekeeping operations beyond its borders. The book *Regional Peacekeepers: The Paradox of Russian Peacekeeping* offers an extensive look at the history of Russian peacekeeping operations in the CIS and the Russian perspective of peacekeeping.<sup>7</sup> The chapter on Russian peacekeeping policies notes a few documents from the 1990s, which demonstrate how Russian officials viewed peacekeeping operations. These documents include the first Russian, post-Soviet military doctrine from 1993, a federal law on deploying peacekeepers from 1995, and a CIS concept adopted by member states from 1996. The 1993 military doctrine outlined how Russian forces would carry out peacekeeping operations that shared a number of similarities with peacekeeping operations by western forces, including separating armed groups and stopping a conflict with impartiality, delivering humanitarian aid, and blockading the conflict zone to create conditions for a political settlement of the conflict. The doctrine noted that Russian forces could carry out a peacekeeping operation following a decision from the UN Security Council, but that resolving conflicts in the CIS needed to meet Russian interests. Additionally, the doctrine put less emphasis on reaching reconciliation from all sides of the conflict and instead favored ending it as quickly as possible. Senior officers in the

Russian armed forces at the time considered peacekeeping as a part of combat activities and that peacekeeping operations should more closely resemble peace enforcement.<sup>8</sup>

The 1995 Federal Law on deploying peacekeepers also outlined traditional peacekeeping tasks for Russian forces in the event that they were deployed and that any military actions had to be approved by the UN Security Council. The CIS concept in 1996 included similar guidance on using force only with UN approval. Ultimately, the documents came out after each of the four peacekeeping operations in the CIS and in the Balkans had already begun. As can be seen in the following brief histories, the peacekeeping operations did not always match the doctrine or other documents, particularly when it came to acting with impartiality or with UN approval.

### **South Ossetia**

The first Russian peacekeeping operation in the CIS was in response to the conflict in South Ossetia, which took place from January 1991 to June 1992 between Georgian and South Ossetian forces. South Ossetia had been an autonomous oblast with the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, with ethnic Ossetians making up the majority of the population just before the conflict. A series of socio-political events in a number of places in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s resulted in various regions striving to become more independent. This also took place in South Ossetia, including Ossetians formally requesting the Georgian Soviet Supreme Council to become an autonomous republic within Georgia. Fighting between Georgian and South Ossetian forces broke out in January 1991 and lasted until the Russian government helped negotiate the Sochi Agreement, a cease-fire agreement signed by the

belligerents on 24 June 1992. Russian forces that had been garrisoned in the region prior to the conflict, provided some weapons and equipment to Ossetian forces.<sup>9</sup>

The cease-fire agreement established the Joint Control Commission (JCC), which consisted of a delegation from Russia, Georgia, and South Ossetia. The JCC worked to guarantee the cease-fire, ensure the withdrawal of the forces involved in the conflict (including various militia and self-defense units) and ensure security in the conflict zone. The JCC did this with the establishment of the Joint Peacekeeping Force (JPKF), which was made up of a battalion each from Russia, Georgia and South Ossetia, the latter of which received logistical and other support from Russia.<sup>10</sup>

The JPKF was tasked with preventing the conflict between Georgians and Ossetians from resuming, establishing checkpoints and for a period of time, enforcing a curfew in the capital of South Ossetia, Tskhinvali. The JPKF also responded to incidents and worked with the local population to deal with tension through the use of a Group of Military Observers (GMO), which consisted of around 70 personnel (a mix of soldiers from each of the battalions) and reported to the JPKF commander. In late 1992, at the request of the Georgian government and with the agreement of Russian and South Ossetian officials, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) sent observers to South Ossetia. The OSCE team (made up of eight diplomats and eight officers) carried out various efforts in the region, including working alongside the JPKF.<sup>11</sup> While this was not a UN mission, its work ran parallel to the Russian efforts and offered international legitimacy to the peacekeeping operation.

The JPKF essentially remains in South Ossetia,

though the August 2008 war between Georgia and Russia changed the dynamic of it. The Georgian government withdrew its contingent of peacekeepers from South Ossetia just before the war started.<sup>12</sup> The presence of the remaining peacekeeping force and other Russian and South Ossetian units continues to be an issue for the Georgian government. These forces in South Ossetia have been involved in what the Georgian government calls “borderization,” a process of erecting barricades or fences on the border of Georgia and the break-away region of South Ossetia and then periodically moving the barriers a distance ranging from a few meters to a few dozen meters further into Georgian territory.<sup>13</sup> Immediately following the war, the Russian government officially recognized the independence of South Ossetia. Additionally, the 2008 war effectively sidelined the OSCE’s observation efforts. Although arguably not part of a long-term design when the peacekeeping operation began, the presence of Russian forces along with the control of the Ossetian belligerents provided Russia with area access that facilitated their operations during the 2008 with Georgia.

### **Transnistria**

The conflict in Transnistria, a region in eastern Moldova, marked another example of a region pushing for independence from a Soviet Republic. Separatists in Transnistria, partly in response to increasing nationalism in Moldova, declared independence from the Moldovan Soviet Republic in September 1990. Within a year, the proclaimed Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR) established a battalion that received weapons and training from the Russian 14th Army, which was garrisoned in Moldova at the time. The battalion then began taking control of institutions and infrastructure in Transnistria. While intermittent

clashes took place between the separatists against a mix of Moldovan forces (which were limited in size and capability) from September 1990 to March 1992, the most significant fighting took place from March to June 1992. The separatists, with support from the Russian 14th Army, eventually gained and held control over Transnistria.<sup>14</sup>

The presidents of Moldova and Russia, Mircea Snegur and Boris Yeltsin respectively, signed an agreement on 21 July 1992, which enabled a cease-fire to the conflict, the deployment of a peacekeeping force, the creation of a security zone and the return of refugees. Russia's contribution to the peacekeeping force initially consisted of six battalions, drawn from units in various military districts, alongside three battalions each from Moldova and the PMR under the command of the trilateral Joint Control Commission (JCC), though this JCC is specific to Transnistria. The Russian 14th Army did not get involved in the peacekeeping operation.

The JCC established the Joint Military Command, which took command over the peacekeeping forces in early August 1992. The peacekeeping forces carried out mine clearing, confiscated illegal weapons, established checkpoints, and oversaw the removal of the various belligerents to the conflict. While Russian units served as peacekeepers, the Russian government had been providing support to the separatists and Moldovan officials accused the peacekeeping forces of allowing the separatist forces to continue to operate in the security zone. Overall, the peacekeeping operation in Transnistria took place at the same time as the operation in South Ossetia and evolved in a similar way, particularly the creation of a commission that included the belligerents to the conflict, but which could be still be controlled by Russia. The Russian government

reduced the overall peacekeeping force in the mid-1990s and it later became the Operational Group of Russian Forces, which continues to serve as a peacekeeping force in Transnistria.<sup>15</sup> While the situation in Transnistria remains relatively stable, Russian forces are in a position to respond to any incidents and maintain control as needed.

### **Tajikistan**

The Russian peacekeeping operation in Tajikistan came in response to the Civil War, which began in 1992 following a disputed presidential election and the collapse of the central government. Fighting broke out in May 1992 between factions connected to the People's Front (also referred to as the Popular Front) against factions with various ideologies that would eventually form the United Tajik Opposition (UTO).<sup>16</sup> The Russian government initially responded to deter the conflict with forces already in place, including the 201st Motorized Rifle Division (which had been garrisoned in Tajikistan prior to 1992). Russian Border Guards detachments (which had also been in place prior to the conflict) provided security along the Tajik-Afghan border. However, under unclear circumstances, factions connected to the People's Front gained weapons and equipment belonging to the Russian 201st. As fighting continued in several regions of Tajikistan, Russia took the lead of the CIS Peacekeeping Force in September 1993. This force consisted of units from Russia (the 201st Motorized Rifle Division) as well as a battalion each from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Beyond facilitating a variety of meetings between the Tajik government and the UTO, the peacekeeping force engaged in mostly non peacekeeping tasks, including guarding critical infrastructure and the Tajik-Afghan border. During these missions, they nevertheless engaged in clashes with different elements of the UTO.<sup>17</sup>

The CIS peacekeeping force numbered around 25,000 total personnel, reaching a high of 28,000 in April 1997, and provided the bulk of security for the Tajik government. The Russian government did not succeed in its attempts to obtain a UN mandate to have the CIS force become an official UN peacekeeping operation; however, it did establish ties with the UN Mission of Observers in Tajikistan (UNMOT), which operated from 1994-2000. Russian units operated in several regions of the country, while each of the battalions from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan deployed to a sector on the Tajik-Afghan border. The peacekeeping force engaged in various tasks, including guarding critical infrastructure and the Tajik-Afghan border, and occasionally clashed with different elements of the UTO.

The CIS/PKF's numbers were reduced following the 1997 peace agreement that ended the war and its mandate ended in 2000. The Russian Border Forces remained in Tajikistan until 2005, when Tajikistan's Border Guards took over responsibilities on the border, while the 201st Military Base remains the largest deployment of Russian forces outside of Russia.<sup>18</sup> The lessons of peacekeeping from the Tajik Civil War emphasized the ability to use a peacekeeping force, not to facilitate the separation of belligerents, but for more strategically impacting reasons such as armed border security operations and the protection of infrastructure that affected the region. It also provided a lesson on how a parallel international organization, in this case the UN, provided an observer mission that helped legitimize Russian strategic intent.

### **Abkhazia**

The Russian peacekeeping operation to end the conflict in Abkhazia shared a few similarities

to what happened in South Ossetia, with ethnic Abkhazians pushing to become independent. The conflict between Georgians and Abkhazians began in August 1992 and lasted until September 1993 with a brief cease-fire from September to October 1992. While Russian forces took part in the previously mentioned conflicts to varying degrees, its participation in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict involved providing air support and training for Abkhazian forces. Georgian and Abkhazian officials eventually agreed to a Russian and UN brokered cease-fire in July 1993, which included the establishment of the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) under UN Security Council Resolution 858, though fighting broke out again in September 1993 and lasted for several months. UNOMIG's mandate ended when the fighting renewed.<sup>19</sup>

All sides agreed to another cease-fire in May 1994 and signed the "Agreement on a Cease-fire and Separation of Forces," or, the Moscow Agreement. The agreement established a security zone and a restriction of heavy weapons zone as well as the deployment of a CIS peacekeeping force to work along the cease-fire line and the UNOMIG to monitor the implementation of the agreement. While the peacekeeping force operated under the CIS moniker, the units came from the Russian Armed Forces and not other CIS member states.<sup>20</sup> The CIS peacekeeping force consisted of two operational groups. One operational group took control of the sector on the northern (Abkhazian) side of the cease-fire line, while the other operational group took control of the southern (Georgian) side of the line. Each operational group consisted of two infantry battalions plus support units as well as a couple of detachments of Russian border guards. The peacekeeping force had to not only

deal with keeping Abkhazian and Georgian forces from resuming the conflict, but faced partisan and terrorist activity from the southern sector of the cease-fire against Abkhazian separatists.<sup>21</sup>

UNOMIG came back with a new mandate under UN Security Council Resolution 937 following the Moscow Agreement. According to reports from UN Secretary General's Office, the UN considered a traditional peacekeeping operation with an international force, but ultimately decided to utilize the CIS peacekeeping force with UNOMIG acting as observers to the implementation of the Moscow Agreement. UNOMIG's mission allowed for over 100 observers (mostly military experts, with some medical and police personnel) to monitor the implementation of the agreement at four levels, including at the overall headquarters of the peacekeeping force, at the headquarters of the north and south sectors, between individual patrols and at the various checkpoints. UNOMIG's observers relied on the CIS peacekeeping force for security and overall, it stood as an example of a close working relationship Russian peacekeepers had with a UN operation at the ground level.<sup>22</sup>

When the conflict began, ethnic Abkhazians were the second largest ethnic group in the region, with Georgians making up the majority. An estimated 200,000 ethnic Georgians were displaced from Abkhazia and their absence made Abkhazians the largest ethnic group. Various clashes and incidents have taken place in and around Abkhazia since the peacekeeping force deployed, but these were limited in scale compared to the earlier conflict between Georgian and Abkhazian forces. The August 2008 Russian-Georgian War also influenced the situation in Abkhazia, but the most significant clashes took place near South Ossetia. The Russian government also recognized the independence of Abkhazia following the war and Russian forces

remain in the region.<sup>23</sup> The August 2008 War also ended UNOMIG's mission and the last observers withdrew in June 2009.<sup>24</sup>

Each of these peacekeeping operations provides an example of how the Russian government used peacekeepers to achieve various strategic objectives, which in each instance meant ending a conflict and maintaining influence in the CIS. These examples also show how Russian forces did not follow a strict definition of western peacekeeping and, at times, it became a peace enforcement operation as Russian forces took part in various activities favoring one belligerent. This ultimately allowed Russia to change the nature of the conflict in these regions to one that more closely aligned with its strategic security objectives there. While Russia sought out but never received an official UN mandate for any of its peacekeeping operations, the UN's missions in Tajikistan and Abkhazia added some international legitimacy to Russia's operations. While these demonstrated that Russia can cooperate with a UN mission, the mandates of UNMOT and UNOMIG were limited compared to the influence of Russia's peacekeeping operations. Lastly, the peacekeeping operations in the CIS show that the Russian armed forces remain in these regions in some capacity, putting them in a position to maintain influence there for the foreseeable future.



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## THE PEACEKEEPING UNITS OF THE COLLECTIVE SECURITY TREATY ORGANIZATION (CSTO)

The CSTO is an intergovernmental military organization that formed following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Several former Soviet republics created and signed the Collective Security Treaty (CST) in 1992, which later turned into the CSTO in 2002. Current members of the CSTO are Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. The charter of the CSTO is made up of 10 chapters that state the organization's purposes and principles and areas of activity, which include cooperation and collective defense.<sup>25</sup> Since 2002 there have been additional amendments to the charter, including a 2007 amendment to conduct peacekeeping operations under a UN Security Council resolution. In 2012 CSTO signed a memorandum of understanding with the UN Department for Peacekeeping Operations. The memo allows the organization to carry out a peacekeeping operation under a UN mandate.<sup>26</sup>

The CSTO has maintained a collective force made up of designated units from member states since 2001. The CSTO's Collective Operational Reaction Force (CORF) includes airborne and special purpose units from member states that serve under a Russian command. All units are home-based, except for various Russian fighter and transport aircraft, and helicopters that are deployed at the Kant Airbase outside Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. The CORF can be deployed to deal with threats from conventional militaries and non-state armed groups, as well as emergency or disaster situations and peacekeeping.<sup>27</sup> Units of the CORF have carried out several joint military exercises which worked through a scenario of a peacekeeping operation, notably,

the "Unbreakable Brotherhood" exercise. The exercise has been carried out annually since 2012, though in 2020 only a few member states took part in it because of the global pandemic.<sup>28</sup> The Russian government continues to present the CORF as ready and capable of carrying out a UN peacekeeping operation.

On 2 January 2022, a protest took place in the city of Zhanaozen in western Kazakhstan over fuel prices. Within a day, additional protests took place in several cities across the country over a number of issues. While the protests were initially peaceful, the situation turned violent as a few groups clashed with police and security forces and eventually took control of government and administrative buildings and the international airport in the city of Almaty. The President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, requested a contingent of peacekeepers from the CSTO as the situation continued to deteriorate, which the leadership of the organization immediately granted. Officials from the CSTO did not announce a mandate or a timetable for the organization's first ever peacekeeping operation, but stated that peacekeepers would be there until the situation stabilized.<sup>29</sup>

The peacekeeping force consisted of over 2000 soldiers (one company each from Russia's 31st Airborne Brigade, 98th Airborne Division, and the 45th Guards Special Forces Brigade, one company from Belarus' 103rd Vitebsk Guards Airborne Brigade, one company from Kyrgyzstan's 25th "Scorpion" Special Forces Brigade, as well as special forces units from Armenia and Tajikistan) and provided security for various infrastructure around Almaty, which included Russian forces guarding the international airport. The peacekeeping force fell under Russian command.<sup>30</sup> President Tokayev stated that the

presence of the peacekeeping force allowed the security forces of Kazakhstan to carry out an operation to restore order against what he called were a group of terrorists that included foreigners.<sup>31</sup>

The CSTO peacekeeping operation in Kazakhstan stood out from other Russian-led peacekeeping operations for a couple of reasons. First, while this marked the organization's first peacekeeping operation, CSTO leadership rejected the two previous requests from member states for peacekeepers or military support from the organization's collective forces in response to incidents. The CSTO did not respond to Kyrgyzstan with military support in June 2010 during interethnic clashes in the south of the country because its articles at the time did not allow a response to an internal security issue in a member state. CSTO member states later agreed to amend the organization's articles to allow the collective forces to be used to respond to an internal threat to security of a member state. The CSTO also rejected the Armenian government's request in May 2021 for military support during its clashes on the border with Azerbaijan. The CSTO claimed that the clashes were a border incident and the organization's article on collective defense did not allow for a response.<sup>32</sup>

Second, the deployment of the CSTO peacekeeping force with no formal mandate left open the possibility that the Russian-led force could stay in Kazakhstan for an indefinite period of time, as the other CIS peacekeeping operations have demonstrated. Despite this concern, CSTO officials announced on 19 January that the peacekeeping mission had ended and all the peacekeepers had withdrawn from Kazakhstan.<sup>33</sup> While the peacekeeping operation did not turn into a long-term Russian presence, it demonstrated Russia's

capability through the CSTO to rapidly deploy a peacekeeping force with the participation of CSTO member states.

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## RUSSIA'S INVOLVEMENT WITH NON-CIS PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS

There are additional examples of peacekeeping operations that provide insight into Russia's view of peacekeeping. Russia's involvement with the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) and NATO-led operations in the Balkans in the 1990s, Russian contributions to various UN peacekeeping operations around the world, as well as the ongoing development of the peacekeeping capabilities of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization's (CSTO) Collective Operational Reaction Force help round out the Russian view of peacekeeping operations.

### **The Russian Contribution to UNPROFOR, IFOR, SFOR, and KFOR**

Russia's involvement with UNPROFOR began in the spring of 1992 with the deployment of an airborne battalion following the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 743. The battalion deployed in Croatia under UN command and carried out monitoring of the cease fire, maintaining order in the buffer zone, carrying out patrols, maintaining checkpoints, providing assistance to refugees, and halting the expulsion of the local population in its area of responsibility. The deployment served as an example of the Russian government under President Yeltsin looking to maintain its position in Europe and as a member of the UN Security Council in addition to cooperation with NATO. Even before the deployment took place, there were concerns that Russian interests in the Balkans favored ethnic Serbs because of cultural and linguistic ties. This

generated questions of the impartiality of Russian forces to act as a peacekeeper between ethnic Croats and Serbs. While ethnic Croats in the area accused Russian forces of having too close of a relationship with a Serbian paramilitary unit in the Russian security zone, there were no reported incidents that indicated Russian forces held any favoritism of Serbs over Croats. UN officials dismissed one Russian general officer, but this was connected to corruption charges and not a lack of impartiality of Russian forces.<sup>34</sup>

The Russian presence in the Balkans as part of UNPROFOR expanded in early 1994 with the deployment of another airborne battalion. The deployment took place following increased fighting among various factions (Bosnian Muslims, Croats and Serbs) and deeper NATO involvement in the conflict. The second Russian airborne battalion deployed in the city of Sarajevo and established a dozen checkpoints between Serbian and Muslim sections. When clashes between Muslims and Serbs took place in the city, the Muslim faction accused Russian forces of supporting Serbs in the fighting. Conversely, Russian officials accused the Muslim faction of trying to provoke Serbian forces. A few Russian soldiers were injured during one of these incidents. As the fighting between various factions continued through 1994, NATO's involvement increased, including air strikes against Serbian forces. This caused some tension between the Russian government and NATO, particularly over how Russians believed NATO largely targeted Serbs and ignored the actions of other groups, but did not negatively influence the overall mission.<sup>35</sup>

The cease-fire and the signing of the Dayton Agreement in 1995 ended UNPROFOR's operation and the withdrawal of its peacekeeping force, but Russia continued its involvement in the region

under the Implementation Force (IFOR), the NATO-led peacekeeping force established out of the Dayton Agreement that ran from December 1995 to December 1996. Russian officials agreed to deploy a brigade (a separate airborne brigade drawn from two airborne divisions) and operate as part of Multi-National Division (North) with a brigade under command of the U.S. First Armored Division. The deployment took place under a UN Security Council Resolution (Resolution 1031) and marked an example of Russian units working at the operational and tactical level on a peacekeeping operation with the armed forces of a country outside the CIS.<sup>36</sup>

The Russian peacekeeping forces developed a good working relationship with U.S. forces and carried out joint patrols in support of the military tasks outlined in the Dayton Agreement, including halting military actions by the factions, establishing a zone of separation, and providing for the withdrawal of the forces and heavy weapons of the factions. The Russian brigade also provided support for the civilian tasks outlined in the Dayton Agreement, which included providing security and assistance to various international organizations delivering humanitarian aid and holding elections. Russian peacekeeping forces completed the military tasks without any issues, but ran into problems when working on civilian tasks, including disagreements over rules of engagement and the role peacekeepers play in support of local civilian authorities. While this caused some issues with carrying out the civilian tasks, it did not prevent ongoing cooperation with the peacekeeping operation. The end of IFOR's mandate in December 1996 reduced the size of Russia's peacekeeping force by around half as it transitioned to take part in the Stabilization Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina (SFOR).<sup>37</sup>

Russian forces continued jointly working at the operational and tactical level with US forces at Multi-National Division (North) with SFOR until 1999, when NATO carried out airstrikes during the Kosovo War. The Russian leadership recalled its commander working with the Supreme Allied Commander Europe following the airstrikes, though Russian peacekeeping forces remained in place. NATO established the Kosovo Force (KFOR), which included forces from NATO and non-NATO members, following UN Security Council Resolution 1244 to end the fighting between Serbs and Kosovo Albanians. A lack of clarity of Russia's involvement in KFOR almost caused an incident in June 1999. Officials on all sides could not agree on where Russian forces would be deployed in Kosovo, though all recognized the significance of the main airport in the region. A group of 200 soldiers from the Russian airborne brigade moved to the Pristina Airport and occupied it without informing NATO. It led to a confrontation between NATO and Russian forces over control of the airport, but the sides eventually negotiated a resolution and carried out peacekeeping tasks for KFOR and SFOR.<sup>38</sup> Russia withdrew its peacekeeping forces from SFOR and KFOR in the summer of 2003.<sup>39</sup>

Overall, the deployment marked an example of the Russian government taking part in a multinational peacekeeping operation, following a UN Security Council resolution and ultimately under command of another force. Its participation led to Russian position and presence at NATO Headquarters and helped the Russian government maintain influence in Europe and internationally following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The break with the Kosovo War in 1999 resonates today with a kind of “proof” that peacekeeping missions—in this case with NATO-led forces—can

provide a cover and advantageous operational position to launch an unrelated military offensive.

### **Russian Contributions to other UN Peacekeeping Operations**

The Russian government has provided support to a number of UN peacekeeping operations since the 1990s with the contribution of military observers, police, and troops, including the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) in the Middle East, the United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Observer Mission (UNIKOM), the United Nations Observer Mission in Angola (MONUA), the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), the United Nations Civilian Police Mission in Haiti (MIPONUH), the United Nations Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL), the United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad (MINURCAT), the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), the United Nations Operation in Cote d'Ivoire (UNOCI), the United Nations Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC), the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), the United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) and the United Nations Integrated Mission in East Timor (UNMIT), among other ongoing operations as of 2021.<sup>40</sup> Russian contributions to UN operations coincided with various political goals, though largely to maintain influence internationally or within a specific region where a peacekeeping operation took place.<sup>41</sup> Altogether, Russia's non-CIS peacekeeping missions helped form the perspective that this sort of peacekeeping can project soft power, but also military power in pursuit of national strategic objectives.

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## THE 2020 NAGORNO-KARABAKH WAR AND THE DEPLOYMENT OF RUSSIAN PEACEKEEPERS

Before examining the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and Russia's deployment of peacekeepers, it is important to briefly look back at events that led up to it. The First Nagorno-Karabakh War took place from 1988-1994 and resulted in the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh becoming a de facto independent state, the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh. As part of the cease-fire agreement that ended the first war, Azerbaijan lost not only the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, but additional districts to the south and west of the region.<sup>42</sup> Nagorno-Karabakh's independence has not been recognized by any UN member state. While the Armenian government does provide economic and military support to Nagorno-Karabakh, it has not officially recognized the independence of the breakaway region. Nagorno-Karabakh's border with Azerbaijan became known as the line of contact and while the Armenian government has denied deploying any of its forces in Nagorno-Karabakh, there has been evidence that units and equipment of the Armenian Armed Forces have been present in the region.<sup>43</sup>

The Russian government has been involved in negotiations to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict through the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)'s Minsk Group as well as unilateral efforts since the conflict began. The Minsk Group has been co-chaired by the U.S, France, and Russia. Russian officials helped mediate the ceasefire agreement that ended the fighting in 1994 in addition to hosting a number of negotiations over the years to attempt to reach a peace agreement.<sup>44</sup> This included several unilateral offers to deploy peacekeepers prior to 2020.<sup>45</sup> The

Minsk Group agreed that any peacekeeping force would be multinational and not include one of co-chairs or a bordering state, which excluded Turkey. Despite Russian-led negotiation efforts to reach a peace agreement, a number of clashes along the line of contact between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces have taken place since 1994. These include large-scale clashes in April 2016 and July 2020, though the latter took place on the Azerbaijani-Armenian border north of Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>46</sup>

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War began on 27 September 2020 when Azerbaijani forces carried out rocket and artillery strikes against Stepanakert, the capital of the occupied region, and at Armenian forces positioned along the north and south of the line of contact. Fighting continued over the course of several weeks as Azerbaijani forces captured territory in southern Nagorno-Karabakh, notably using unmanned aerial systems acquired from Turkey and Israel. After a couple of weeks of fighting, Russian officials helped negotiate a cease-fire on 10 October between Armenia and Azerbaijan to exchange prisoners, but this only lasted a matter of hours before fighting continued. The governments of France and the U.S. also helped broker ceasefires on 18 and 26 October respectively, but both of these broke down as Azerbaijan continued to gain more territory, including the city of Shusha on 8 November. On 9 November, the governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia announced that they had signed a ceasefire agreement, which took effect at midnight on 10 November.<sup>47</sup>

The ceasefire agreement included nine terms, but only three specifically outlined the function of the peacekeeping operation. These terms included the introduction of a Russian peacekeeping force consisting of around 2000 personnel

to be deployed along the line of contact in Nagorno Karabakh, that the deployment of the peacekeeping force take place simultaneously with the removal of all Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh, and the establishment of the Lachin corridor connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenian territory (the corridor is located within the Lachin District, which had been part of the occupied territory of Azerbaijan), which will be under the protection of the Russian peacekeeping force. The terms of the ceasefire agreement do not include any legal framework which outlines the activities of the peacekeeping force, and stipulates that the operation will last for five years and can be renewed for additional five year periods if both the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments approve. The government of Azerbaijan's approval is particularly important as the territory that the Russian peacekeeping force operates in is still internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan.<sup>48</sup>

The ceasefire agreement also included terms that allowed Azerbaijan to retain control of territory in Nagorno-Karabakh gained during the war, the return of additional districts in the west and east of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan, and the establishment of a transportation route from Azerbaijan to its exclave of Nakhchivan through Armenian territory, near the Armenian-Iranian border.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, the governments of Russia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey created a joint observation center staffed by Russian and Turkish personnel located in Azerbaijan to monitor the ceasefire agreement.<sup>50</sup>

Similar to previous Russian peacekeeping operations in the CIS, the operation in Nagorno-Karabakh is not under a UN mandate; however, the operation is being carried out with the approval of the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan as part of the ceasefire agreement. The peacekeeping

force itself is made up of 1960 soldiers from the 15th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade equipped with several dozen armored personnel carriers, attack and transport helicopters, as well as unmanned aerial vehicles.<sup>51</sup> In addition to this, border guards from the Federal Security Service (FSB) and personnel from the Ministry of Emergency Situations deployed to provide support and carry out humanitarian work in Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>52</sup>

The Russian peacekeeping force divided Nagorno-Karabakh into two zones of responsibility (a northern and southern zone), with its headquarters in the city of Stepanakert, and established a dozen observation posts in each zone. The observation posts are situated along the line of contact in both zones, while two observation posts are located within the Lachin corridor.<sup>53</sup> The peacekeeping forces have been involved with carrying out patrols, providing escorts for civilians through the Lachin corridor as well as members of Azerbaijan's armed forces moving around the country's newly acquired districts, protecting infrastructure, removing land mines and unexploded ordnance, conducting readiness exercises, and ensuring the terms of the cease fire are met.<sup>54</sup>

The Russian peacekeeping operation had been generally accepted by all sides for several months after the deployment began, but several clashes between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces have taken place since the summer of 2021 and reduced the possibility that the governments Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan will sign a legal mandate for the peacekeeping operation.<sup>55</sup> The three governments have noted the lack of a legal mandate for the peacekeeping operation since it began and while these incidents have not forced Russian peacekeeping forces to get involved, it leaves open the possibility that one of the governments will not agree to renew the peacekeeping operation

for another five-year period. This is consistent with the Russian evolutionary view that peacekeeping operations can evolve from immediate conflict resolution to one of forward force deployment for other strategic advantages.

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## ASSESSMENT AND OUTLOOK

The Russian military doctrine, articles from other sources in the Russian armed forces and the experience of Russian peacekeeping operations provide examples of how Russia views peacekeeping as a part of modern warfare, not an ill-suited mission that only the military can do. The doctrine mentions taking part in peacekeeping operations under the auspices of the UN or within the framework of an international or regional organization, though Russia's past peacekeeping operations in the CIS demonstrate its willingness to act unilaterally. The articles and presentations at the Russian Academy of Military Science each mention how peacekeeping can be used as a type of military operation, though these did not mention working with the UN or another organization.

Russia's past peacekeeping operations in the CIS provide the best examples of how it views peacekeeping. These operations have shown how Russian peacekeeping operations involved ending the conflict as quickly as possible and enforcing terms of any cease-fire agreement, including taking action that favored one of the belligerents as long as it remains in the dominant position. In some of the peacekeeping operations, Russia used airborne units other units in the Russian Army. Russian airborne units are considered more elite and capable of carrying out offensive operations than other units in the Russian Army. This demonstrates how Russia is

prepared not only for a peacekeeping operation involving post-conflict tasks, but is also prepared to provide deterrence or intervene, if necessary. Issues in each of the conflict regions in the CIS remain, like the territorial integrity of Georgia. There have been sporadic incidents of violence in these regions in the years since, but other than the Russian-Georgian War in 2008, armed conflict has not resumed. Russian forces have proven to be capable of cooperating and working with international peacekeeping operations, like with peacekeeping operations in the Balkans in the 1990s and in a limited capacity with ongoing UN peacekeeping operations, but this has proven to largely take place when the Russian government is looking to maintain influence regionally or internationally. The examples of Russia's past peacekeeping operations show that the Russian government prioritizes peacekeeping operations when they are within the country's sphere of influence.

Russia's Nagorno-Karabakh peacekeeping operation ended a conflict and helped the Russian government maintain influence in the CIS. The operation in Nagorno-Karabakh also closely matched how Russia sees peacekeeping as a type of warfare through its doctrine and other sources and how it acted within its own interests. The peacekeeping operation also allowed Russia to work outside the efforts of the OSCE Minsk Group and effectively sidelined the organization in the process of resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Additionally, it showed how the Russian government will continue to work outside the UN to carry out a peacekeeping operation and that the lack of an international legal mandate did not prevent Russian forces from deploying and establishing a presence in Nagorno-Karabakh in a matter of days. Future clashes between

Armenian and Azerbaijani forces could draw Russia further into a conflict that might involve Turkey as it continues to support Azerbaijan, but overall, the deployment of peacekeepers to Nagorno-Karabakh served as another example of how Russia utilizes peacekeeping operations to achieve strategic objectives beyond the particular mission at hand. They see it more broadly and

with more nuance as part of modern warfare. As Russia's war in Ukraine continues, the Russian government could use a peacekeeping operation as part of its negotiations to end the conflict. If a Russian peacekeeping operation takes place in Ukraine, it would likely end in a similar way as the past conflicts in the CIS have shown, with Russian forces remaining in Ukraine.

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