



MOSCOW'S STABILITY OPERATIONS: A BRIEF HISTORY

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Stability operations initiated by Moscow, whether in the Soviet or post-Cold War era contexts, are peculiar in their own history and methods from all the others set up by the UN, by other international and regional organizations and by the “coalition of the willing.”

Moscow put such military operations on two different levels: ones led by the UN, and those that can be attributed to the Community of Independent States (CIS), and considered by Moscow almost as internal affairs, and thus conceived, directed, and managed as such.

The first such operation began relatively late, in November 1973, with the dispatch of 36 military observers, all unarmed commissioned officers, to the oldest peace operation of the United Nations ([UNTSO](#)). The observers were accompanied by a further 36 “interpreters” (or controllers, likely coming from the GRU, the Soviet military intelligence service). The UNTSO, *ad hoc* expanded, was to operate in support of the troops of the UN interposition force deployed after the [Yom Kippur War](#) in Sinai, [UNEF II](#).

The presence of these “interpreters” immediately created a major problem for the UN (which could not give consideration to military observers, given that they had to express themselves and write in English, the working language of the organization) – not to mention the financial, logistical, insurance and legal problems. But all this was in the midst of the Cold War and, only after a long negotiation did the “interpreters” leave, and in this way, the USSR also kept its presence in UNTSO, after the end of UNEF II, in 1979. Until 1991, members of UNTSO were the only Soviet-Russian “blue helmets.” After the liberation of Kuwait and to monitor the truce in Western Sahara, other military observers were sent, respectively, [UNIKOM](#) and [MINURSO](#) (the latter, even if in reduced strength, is still present).

Since then, there are few UN missions that have not seen a presence of military observers, police personnel, support helicopters and other specialists sent from Moscow, in accordance with the choice of opening to the world of the new Kremlin leadership. This choice sees only some small variations, given the stiff resistance by Moscow of sending formed units abroad, synthesized in a battalion of paratroopers, dispatched to the former Yugoslavia, in the framework of [UNPROFOR](#), between 1992 and 1996; and this only after several requests and with many difficulties.

Leaving aside the presence of the two Russian battalions included in the NATO-led peacekeeping missions to Bosnia and Kosovo ([I-FOR/S-FOR](#) and [K-FOR](#)), it is useful to summarize, and as far as possible, analyze the role and function of those operating in the peripheral area of the former USSR

(or “near abroad” for the new Russia). While the most recent, tasked to monitor the ceasefire line between the forces of [Nagorno/Karabach](#) and Armenia on the one side and Azerbaijan on the other is ongoing, most of those missions completed their mandate, and others are presumed to be closed soon.

According to the universally accepted doctrine of stability operations, these operations lack the fundamental principles of stability operations, such as, impartiality between opposing factions, and being a presence mutually accepted by them, with limited use of force and that only for the purpose of self-defense and within the limits of the implementation of the mandate. However, this statement, which comes from Western experts and scholars of stability operations, is partial.

As mentioned, all these operations for Moscow, since the uncertain days of the end of USSR and the more uncertain days of the beginning of the [CIS](#) (Community of Independent States, a substitute body for the immediate post-USSR), represented a very critical political value and, as such, were carefully designed and managed; all had the pivotal objective of protecting the interests of the Kremlin, starting with the protection of the Russian and/or Russian-speaking populations, and securing strategic assets and corridors. This pragmatic approach has gradually established a series of mission options, which have a solid political plan and a realistic time-line.

Where the criticism is, however, pertinent is the lack of legitimacy of the emanating body, due to the uncertain and ambiguous role and juridical status of the CIS, perceived as a mere long-arm of Moscow's interests and objectives.

For example, the agreement which followed the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, covers a period of five years. It may seem long, but it allowed for an exist, from the various weary rituals of renewal issued, often after tedious negotiations, like the annual (or even half-yearly) meetings at the UN Security Council, a phase which put the operations under regular stress, and thus creating or exacerbating tensions on the ground, while raising expectations of the former warring parties.

Also, from observed experiences of stabilization operations carried out by the UN, the Russian forces appeared to be more heavily armed and thus had a deterrent capacity that reduced the potential threats from those who would want to break the truce and confront forces with mobility, self-protection, and hostile fire suppression capabilities far superior to those of “blue helmets.”

This deterrence discouraged the former warring parties to undertake dangerous escalations, making these operations much more effective, as is often the case for UN missions, which facilitate the political dialogue framework, by reducing the space of maneuver and blackmailing of the former warring parties.

Many of these forces (former Soviet and/or initially CIS-led) were already garrisoning in the area from the time of the existence of the USSR and often reacted to the exploding problems, applying Moscow's guidelines in an average effective manner, given the circumstances.

The disintegration of the USSR, and the formation of 12 independent republics, had great consequences on the stability of the former federation and impacted the new born states, which inherited the distortions of Soviet times.

In fact, in areas where Soviet intervention was particularly heavy with border and population displacements, violent conflicts erupted (like in the Caucasus), as the process of political and economic restructuring of the USSR, begun in the second half of the 1980s by [Gorbachov](#), weakened the repressive apparatus that had oppressed those regions since the mid-1920s.

After the official end of the Soviet Union, which materialized in December 1991, the need to maintain an integrated economic system favored the establishment of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), an interstate body with a vague nature, characteristic and structure.

This community, directly hegemonized by Moscow, was established on 21 December 1991 in [Alma Ata/Almaty](#) in Kazakhstan. Despite serious economic and social internal turmoil and institutional re-foundation, already in the summer of 1992, Moscow first re-started a minimum interstate dialogue, trying to circumscribe the various crisis hotspots (Transcaucasia, Central Asia and Moldova), initially using the ex-Soviet forces still in those territories. Second, Moscow established and supported these multilateral interposition contingents, including (and also integrating) military units of the warring parties; thus, creating a conceptual novelty for this type of operation (however entirely ignored in the West). This format was adopted to include and to make accountable the former warring parties and defuse the restart of conflicts.

This choice however was badly perceived by one side, especially when the other side include

separatist movements/fractions, as an attempt to legitimize those elements. This was bluntly rejected by countries like Georgia, which saw these forces as a move led by Moscow to undermine the newly reached independence of [Batumi](#).

The CIS-led forces cooperated, to a rather limited extent, with [OSCE](#) and UN observer missions. Several of them completed their respective mandates as well, thanks to the massive diplomatic and institutional action conducted by Moscow, which tended to reabsorb these new/old nations (internationally recognized or not) in its political, economic, and strategic orbit.

Although indirectly, the Chechen question, and the brutal (and inconclusive) Russian attempts to overcome the *many military* crisis, constituted by the tensions within the non-Russian states of the Community which refused to participate to those operation.

This situation resulted in frequent problems between Moscow and the newly formed post-Soviet republics, which were unwilling to accept supinely the exclusive direction by the Russian side of military structures of the CIS (both of the central bodies of the organization and of the stabilization forces that were progressively formed); and the growing perplexity of some states to act as a purely rear area for the Russian and CIS forces, operating especially in Central Asia and consequently, return *sic et simpliciter* to the orbit of Moscow.

The establishment of these multilateral forces does not in many cases mean the automatic withdrawal from those territories of the Russian (and former USSR) contingents, often supported by large and heavily armed units of the newly constituted [CIS Border Guard](#) (the former Soviet frontier guard, a uniformed wing of the KGB).

With gradual stabilization underway in Moscow, and what emanates from it, these formations were progressively transformed into a more stable military presence, thus carrying out a function of protection of the Russian populations residing in those republics through a series of agreements that Russia progressively stipulated with these states which also granted the use of various military bases, freedom of movement and use of airspace.

In addition to military presence, Moscow's action was accompanied by a process of institutional reorganization, characterized by a relevant ability to mediate between the conflicting needs of the

parties and using the lever of the promise of economic aid to mitigate the conflicts (though limited, given the condition of the Russian financial situation).

Moscow's determination lies in the need to have its peripheral areas as stable as possible, to maintain control over very delicate geographical and strategic junctions (Central-Western Asia, the Caucasus, Black Sea, oil pipelines, etc.), and to protect the Russian populations.

This situation created a *droit de regard* from Russia out towards the former Soviet republics, despite many protests in international fora and states, such as, by the US, EU, NATO, UN and the OSCE, which saw their ability to act seriously become limited. In fact, Moscow only agreed to the presence of observation missions and good offices, and placed a very firm veto on the deployment of international military forces.

In January 1996, in the face of continuous requests for clarification by the UN, the CIS, through the Russian delegation to the UN, presented a document that clearly defined the status, nature, tasks and missions of the peacekeeping forces of this body, which until then was rather confused.

The document takes up, with some differences (especially relating to the use of force), the basic concepts of UN peacekeeping operations. It also clarifies the presence and duties of military forces, police personnel, and military observers in these missions. Guidelines were also established for relations between CIS forces and the personnel of other international bodies, such as the UN, OSCE and non-governmental, humanitarian assistance, civil and human rights monitoring bodies.

Even Moscow, in the context of the more general restructuring of its armed forces, initially faced a deficit of predesigned units for this type of operation; but it coped as best as it could by using resources already available, to then build *ad hoc* units for this kind of operation; and these units were precisely those sent to guard the truce line between the Armenian and Azerbaijani forces, after the conflict in 2020.

Even if CIS was a structure considered by Moscow as a temporary solution (it still exists), it managed all the stabilization operations. But its architecture was also gradually supported by the [CSTO](#) (Collective Security Treaty Organization) which, established since 1993 and through a long process, lasted more than ten years. CSTO became the long-arm of Moscow in the "near abroad," even if the participation of

some states was fluctuating.

CSTO, among the numerous sub-architectures established (and largely different from CIS, which remained almost exclusively a heads-of-state council secretariat), had a more solid political and military mechanism, dedicated to stabilization (with a force of 3,000 military and police personnel), and which was ready to intervene, according to the decisions of the Council of Heads of State of the organization; or, upon request, to intervene in support of UN-led operations, though thus far it has never intervened in such a capacity (namely, a robust, mechanized infantry formation, able to impose and supervise a ceasefire, monitor road access and protect civilian populations from the actions of irregular elements, by borrowing aforementioned principles).

Tajikistan

Between 1992 and 1997, in [Tajikistan](#), during a violent inter-ethnic conflict between non-Russian population components, there were a recorded 100,000 dead and half a million refugees. Since 1992, Russian forces basically present from the Soviet era (the [201st Motorized Rifle Division](#)) had been formally acting as an interposition mandated by CIS, even though the behavior of its personnel was often the subject of criticism. But that was in the darkest days of the post-Soviet era and often salaries and supplies never arrived, and the personnel sold weapons and equipment to the parties.

Beyond these considerations, Russian troops were mandated by CIS to keep order. Since 1993, this decision was translated into an increased and open support of pro-Moscow leadership in the country. In August 1993, CIS gave its full mandate to Russian and some Central Asian republic forces, present in Tajikistan (at that time 25,000 soldiers), to resume forcible disarmament operations of the insurgent formations. In September of that year Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan asked (unsuccessfully) that these forces obtain UN mandate under [Chapter VII](#) of its *Charter*, (and thus also removing the embarrassment of CIS in allowing a one-side operation).

In allowing the UN Security Council to mandate CIS forces, it was decided to expedite the operation of disarmament and solve the issue as soon as possible. The civil war ended in 1997, with an agreement, promoted by the UN, which saw the prevalence of a line in favor of Moscow, and CIS troops gradually withdrew (the operation ended in 2000). In 1997, the Collective Peacekeeping Forces ([CPF](#)) numbered more than 12,000 soldiers (the 201st Motorized Rifle Division and three army battalions from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan), as well as 17,000 border guards (mostly Russian, with small

contingents of similar Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan forces).

Abkhazia

In [Abkhazia](#), the local independence forces, formed immediately after the independence of Georgia, clashed with the army of [Tbilisi](#), newly formed in 1992, and defeated it. Moscow followed its policy of establishing multilateral forces and a mechanism of dialogue and coordination, but with partial success.

On May 14, 1994, after difficult negotiations, held under the aegis of the UN, the parties signed an agreement in Moscow to a ceasefire and separation of forces. The collective peacekeeping forces of the CIS, established by decision of the Council of Heads of State of the Community, included only Russian units, after the failure of the constitution of a joint force that would have included Abkhazian and Georgian elements because of the animosity between the two parties.

The JPKF (Joint Peacekeeping Force), deployed in June 1994, controlled a 24km wide security zone, along the line of contact between opposing forces. The only multilateral forum established was the JCC (Joint Consultation Committee), a consultation body and good offices, chaired by the Russian military.

On 10 October 2008, in accordance with the decision taken at the meeting of the [CIS Council of Heads of State](#), held in [Bishkek](#), the mandate of the JPKF, after 14 years of stay, ended; and a week later the Russian peacekeepers withdrew. Between October and early December, Russian troops replaced the JPKF and established new fortified positions on the side of the Abkhaz-controlled ceasefire line. The last Russian unit left the area in November of that year (after the short conflict between Georgia and Ossetia ended) and Abkhazian forces were deployed directly on the border with Georgia.

South Ossetia

Another autonomous region of Georgia—[South Ossetia](#)—aspired to political independence in the late 1980s. After the collapse of the USSR, that aspiration turned into an armed confrontation between self-formed local militias against the Georgian army, which was heavily defeated and Ossetia became *de facto* independent, but closely linked to Moscow (regardless that another conflict opposed South and [North Ossetian](#) forces).

After the ceasefire, also reached in 1994, Russian peacekeeping forces, under the auspices of the CIS, were deployed in the conflict zones. This only happened, after a previous unsuccessful attempt, because of the tough intransigence of Georgia to deploy a multilateral force formed by a Russian battalion (700) together with a Georgian battalion (320) and one of South Ossetia (470), also in this case called JPKF.

Afterwards, the situation was substantially stable, despite the permanent hostility of Georgian governments. In August 2008, the Georgian army attacked South Ossetia by surprise, killing 15 JPKF soldiers. Moscow reacted quickly, resulting in the so-called "[Five Day War](#)" between Georgia and Russia, with Abkhazia joining South Ossetia. As a result of the operation, South Ossetia and the small parts of Abkhazia that came under Georgian control on that occasion were liberated from the Tbilisi troops.

At the end of August, the two self-proclaimed republics asked Russia to recognize their independence, which was done by Moscow. In October of the same year, the JPKF withdrew and was initially replaced by Russian border guards and army units, which were gradually joined, and later replaced, by elements of the South Ossetian self-defense forces.

Armenia/Azerbaijan

The recent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan followed an even more violent previous one. Like the most recent, the reason for the dispute was the control of the Armenian populated Nagorno-Karabach enclave within Azerbaijan. This dispute began, in political terms, as early as 1987; and as the authority of the USSR loosened over the whole of Transcaucasia, the conflict became more and more violent, until it led to an open war, in 1990, and caused 15,000 deaths and a million refugees, until the spring of 1992, and which saw a heavy Azerbaijani defeat.

By the summer of 1992, after an agreement between the parties, a Russian regiment was deployed as an interposition force of CIS that separated the regular forces of Yerevan and the Armenian separatists of Nagorno-Karabach from the Azerbaijani ones. However, the mutual mistrust between Armenians and Azerbaijanis did not allow for the deployment of a multilateral force with Russian, Armenian, Azerbaijani and Nagorno-Karabach separatists, as originally envisaged by the JCC (Joint Consultation Committee), a multilateral body, in charge of direction and management of the operation, which was the only one where both sides sat together. So, JPKLEF (Joint Peacekeeping and Law Enforcement Force), in charge

of controlling the ceasefire, was formed, but only made up of Russian troops. This force was then withdrawn not only for the stability of the ceasefire, but also due to the decisive rapprochement between Armenia and Russia, which led to the signing of a bilateral agreement in 1997, which also provided for the establishment of a consistent Russian military presence in that country.

Moldova

On 27 August 1991, [Moldova](#) declared independence from the USSR and a few weeks later clashes broke out between the forces of the newborn republic and the self-defense formations of the Russian and Ukrainian populations residing in the [Transdnestr](#) region, which declared itself an independent republic on 2 September and called for annexation to Russia.

The clashes continued increasingly violent, and on 6 July, JPKF (Joint Peacekeeping Force) was sent by CIS decision; and in mid-July was deployed to [Transnistria](#). The force (whose composition was the result of intense negotiations promoted by Moscow), under Russian command, comprised 2 Moldovan battalions, 2 Transnistrian battalions and 5 Russian battalions (other sources report instead 3, 3 and 6 battalions respectively) for a total of 2000 units.

Again, the JPKF depended on the JCC (Joint Consultation Committee), which brought together high-level Russian and party political and military representatives, and worked to manage the operation. The presence of the CIS force replaced the very brief presence of a multilateral observation mission made up, following a diplomatic agreement, of military observers, for the control of the truce, from Bulgaria, Turkey, Romania, Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and Transnistria, and decided upon in June 1992, but which obtained no results whatsoever.

By August, the JPKF, after stabilizing the situation, allowed the return of 50,000 refugees, the reopening of the roads between the two territories and substantial normalization. In November 1994, Moscow unilaterally withdrew half of its contingent from the JPKF for budgetary reasons (despite protests from both sides), while the JCC, which cooperated with a similar OSCE mission, remained on site from the beginning of 1993.

In the context of the Transnistrian affair, we must mention the presence in that territory of the Soviet (later [Russian](#)) [XIV Army](#), which, despite the task of cooperating with the JPKF, carried out a clear

partisan action in favor of the Russian-speaking militias, by supplying weapons and instructors to the local National Guard. By the spring of 1997, following agreements dating back to 1994, between the Moldovan government and the autonomists of Transnistria, the XIV army (in the meantime reduced from 12,000 soldiers to 7,000, while today it only numbers 1,500) began a partial withdrawal. The Russian troops, though reduced by number, continued to be stationed in Transnistria.

The Russian presence in Transnistria was however at the center of constant tensions between [Chisnau](#) (which repeatedly asked for their withdrawal), [Tiraspol](#) and Moscow. The progressive distancing of Moldova from Russian area of influence made Chisnau's request for the withdrawal of Russian troops (including the remaining JPKF forces, now reduced to less than 400 soldiers) and the dissolution of the JCC, more vocal. Moscow tried to resist as much as it could, but the gradual rapprochement of Moldova and Ukraine to the EU and NATO made the situation of Russian troops (JPKF and the remnant of the XIV army) in Transnistria increasingly problematic.

The foreseeable solution, sponsored by the OSCE, of the end of secession of Transnistria and its return into Moldova institutional framework in exchange for a vast administrative, cultural, and linguistic autonomy, makes this presence a dossier to be resolved in the near future.

Comment

A proper analysis of the stability operations carried out by Moscow must be seen through the lens of politics. Those operations were part of a broader action of Russia to stabilize as much as possible the "near abroad: and not to lose the control of the new republics, and to maintain access to their natural resources, while keeping a strategic depth/buffer zone. Last, but not least, these operations guaranteed the safety of the Russian-speaking population (with the perspective of using them as a tool of influence in better times, while keeping a solid grip on the internal policy-making of these countries).

All these objectives were met, by various ways and means, and in time. But the evolution of the political landscape, with the progressive emergence of leadership in these countries less and less keen to cooperate with Moscow (especially Georgia, as the first example, and progressively followed by Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia and Azerbaijan)—weakened the Russian-led project which sought to save as much as possible of the gains of the then USSR.

This situation co-existed with the tireless efforts of the EU and NATO to increase their influence there, with specific programmes, like the [ENP](#) (European Neighborhood Policy) and [EAPC/PfP](#) (Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council/Partnership for Peace).

If these political considerations are not taken into account, the stability operations carried out by Moscow reached a good level of success, allowing Russia to achieve, at least for a period, its political targets.

But, given that the stability operations can be more politically profiled as any other military activity, they also cannot be considered as a fully separated entity or fact.

No doubt, that despite the failure of establishing "collective" (as termed also by Moscow) peacekeeping forces, the presence of Russian troops under the aegis of CIS, those missions did lead to the defusing, at least for a period, of tensions on the ground and blocked a further worsening.

The reliability of the Russia forces involved in the CIS-led operation was widely demonstrated by their reaction against the aggression of Georgian forces in 2008, a reaction which slowed the progression of the Batumi forces, and which gave time to Moscow to deploy more larger forces in the area, which defeated the aggression.

Like all the peacekeeping/stability missions established by other organizations, every operation is a specific case, with its own historical and political background, bilateral/multilateral; and, generally, the ones in the Caucasus went well enough, as well as the one in Tajikistan. The former was a "lesson-learned" mission for other operations for Moscow leadership (political and military).

The main lesson learned was to collocate any operation to the most proper political context (always with the perspective of reaching its own strategic objectives), and having dedicated forces, which could ensure the reach of the stability on the ground, and in parallel protect Moscow's interests.

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The [featured images](#) shows, "A Letter to the Foes of Russia," by Vasily Nesterenko, painted ca. 2017-2018.

