

The OSCE Minsk Group as a Tool to Promote U.S. Interests in the Caucasus

By [Andrei Areshev](#)

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The refusal by U.S. State Department to issue an entry visa to Abkhazia's Foreign Minister Sergei Shamba caused severe criticism of its American colleagues from the Russian Foreign Ministry. The comment of the Ministry's Information and Press Department had it that by acting this way "U.S. State Department has actually blocked the holding of an unofficial meeting between the Abkhazian representative and members of the U.N. Security Council on the eve of negotiations aimed at getting an agreement on the text of a new resolution relating to the settlement of the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict."

Other excerpts of the text of the official statement of the RF Foreign Ministry are no less noteworthy: "This stance of the American diplomacy causes misunderstanding, raising serious question here in Moscow... **The Abkhazian side as one of the officially acknowledged parties to the conflict has every right, along with Georgia, to get its message across to the international participants of the settlement process to express its views of the essence of the provisions of the resolution that have to do with it.**" (emphasised by me, A.A.)

The controversy between Russia and the United States over the entire complex of issues related to the unsettled conflicts is snowballing. A recent session of the UN Security Council was devoted to "[the Ahtisaari Plan](#)", according to which the region is to be granted actual independence. A clear threat of a Russian veto made the West accelerate the re-grouping of its diplomatic combat units concerning the Kosovo issue. Former U.S. UN representative Richard Halbrook, one of the top figures behind the bloodshed in the Balkans and the follow-up Bosnian "peace-making", has warned that "a delay and emasculation of the plan, or a veto on granting independence to Kosovo under the guidance of an EU mission would result in a bloodshed, for which Russia would be held responsible. Moscow's response to this blackmail complete with its threat of unleashing a new battle in the Balkans was extremely negative, while the scandal around the aborted visit to New York of the Abkhazian delegation only increased mutual distrust and suspicions.

From time to time one can hear that there still is one conflict, approaching which Russia, the United States and Europe identify with one another as in no other case. What is meant is the Karabakh conflict where different brokers are going out of their ways to observe politesse and to demonstrate their unity of approach. Another proof of this stance comes from Yerevan, where Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov paid a visit several days ago. According to him, the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, to a greater degree than any other conflict, has to be given the status of a unique case, and not because principles other than

those of the international law are applicable to it. The case rather is that “from the practical point of view this must probably be the only conflict where the interests of Russia, the United States and the EU are never contradictory at the same time not contradicting the interests of the conflicting sides.”

Such a statement can really bewilder. From what Sergei Lavrov said it is not quite clear why Karabakh was destined to be “so lucky”. It makes one think that the Russian minister was assigned to demonstrate at least one example of Moscow’s successful interaction with Washington in an attempt to settle at least one “frozen” conflict. But it did not work out that way!

Regardless of the fact that both Moscow and Washington never stop declaring that there is no alternative to the OSCE Minsk Group, its intermediary’s activities of many years have been stalled. It would be hard to expect something different, given that right from the start the Minsk Group was a product of a political consensus of the world’s leading players (the U.S., Russia and the EU) without a clearly formulated mandate, and consequently, without clear-cut authority.

Over the period starting from the conclusion in 1994 – thanks to Russia’s efforts -of a truce in Karabakh, [the United States have been taking most drastic measures aimed to ensure its forced military and political and economic penetration into the Transcaucasus.](#)

The role to be played by the Minsk Group has been transformed accordingly. It has now virtually become a tool of realisation of U.S. interests in this region.

Matthew Braiza, the group’s U.S. co-chair, has for a long time promoted U.S. energy projects on the post-Soviet space, and he is still at it. Neither is he indifferent to the “Iranian problem”. Speaking at a press conference in Tbilisi on March 30th, Braiza said: **“under urgent conditions the United States would count on using an Azeri aerodrome for military purposes.”** Many commentators viewed that as another proof of Washington’s intention to solve “the Iranian problem” by force. And in such an eventuality the consequences can be most unfavourable to Armenia, the Republic of Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan. Russian co-chairman of the Minsk Group Y. Merzliakov is of the opinion that the intensification of tension around Iran would put off the solution of the Karabakh problem thus possibly leading to its new “freezing.” However, Merzliakov’s U.S. colleague thinks that the peaceful solution of the Karabakh issue based on a compromise is not an end in itself, as it is absolutely secondary to the solution of more important “global” issues that are in no small degree connected with the complete ousting of Russia from Transcaucasia.

To speak of any coincidence of Russia’s and the U.S. interests in the solution of the Karabakh problem – as well as the problems of Kosovo, Abkhazia and South Ossetia – is out of the question. Try as they might, diplomats would fail to reassure the world public that the situation is reverse. Their assurances look as some sort of self-mesmerising, dangerous in its distortion of reality.

To those unwilling to go on milling over the settlement of the Karabakh problem, the only constructive way is to consider the issue of whether Russia should continue its membership in the OSCE Minsk Group as well as that of a return to the negotiations format worked out by the 1994 OSCE Budapest summit and the follow-up resolutions. As is prescribed by that format there are three parties at the Karabakh negotiations, Azerbaijan, Armenia and the Republic of Nagorno Karabakh (NKR), whose status as an internationally acknowledged

party to the conflict is identical to that of Abkhazia or South Ossetia.

The NKR, as well as other de-facto post-Soviet states, is entitled to have “the complete right to bring across to the international parties to the process of settlement its views”, demanding that its right be respected. It expects this right to be acknowledged.

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