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At the 18-19 October Istanbul summit of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Russia skillfully managed to turn what could have been a public relations nightmare into a diplomatic coup.

At issue: the country's continued stationing -- in violation of the CFE treaty -- of troops in Moldova and Georgia. The legal status of troops in Moldova is particularly cloudy. While Russia has at least a pretext to continue operating its bases in Georgia, thanks to the 1995 agreement "On the Presence of Russian Bases in Georgia," it has no such pretext in Moldova. According to the 1994 Moldo-Russian Agreement, signed by then-Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, Russia should have removed its forces from Moldova by 1997.

Instead of censure for its continued procrastination over the issue, however, Russia was praised for promising, one more time, to move its troops out of the country. Rather than insisting that Russia uphold its previous promises to the OSCE, the organization happily accepted Russia's new gestures, acting as though Russia had not already gone back on its word.

News agencies reported that pressure from the international community over bombings in Chechnya had forced Russia to make concessions over the troops it has in Moldova's Transdniestr region and at four bases on Georgian territory -- both holdovers from Soviet times. "Russia agrees to reduce troops in Georgia, Moldova," trumpeted the Reuters headline. "Chechnya pressure speeds pullout elsewhere: diplomat," said Agence France-Presse. "[Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov] reached agreements with Georgia and Moldova to withdraw Russian
forces from their territories in coming years," explained The New York Times.

Officials were more than willing to pat themselves on the back for their success in forcing Russia to accept Moscow's plan. "If there had not been Western pressure over Chechnya," said one unnamed senior Western diplomat, "the Russians would no doubt have continued to procrastinate on these two issues [Moldova and Georgia]." (Agence France-Presse, 1723 GMT, 19 Nov 99; via lexis-nexis)

It would seem, however, that "procrastinate" is precisely what the Western diplomats in Istanbul have allowed Russia to do, particularly with regard to Moldova. The Istanbul Summit Declaration actually expands the timetable for the withdrawal of Russia's 14th Army (the Operational Group of Forces) from Moldova. A 1994 agreement with Moldova, signed and then ignored by Moscow, committed Russia to evacuating its soldiers and weapons from Moldova by 1997. (ITAR-TASS, 4 Oct 94; via World News Connection and ITAR-TASS, 22 Oct 94; via World News Connection) That agreement was hailed by the OSCE in 1994 and 1996, but apparently forgotten in Istanbul. The Istanbul Declaration credits Russia with progress toward removing its troops from Moldova, even though the country has in no way lived up to either its 1994 agreement or the promises it made to the OSCE at the '94 Budapest and '96 Lisbon Summits.

The Istanbul Declaration stated: "Recalling the decisions of the Budapest and Lisbon Summits and Oslo Ministerial Meeting, we reiterate our expectation of an early, orderly and complete withdrawal of Russian troops from Moldova. In this context, we welcome the recent progress achieved in the removal and destruction of the Russian military equipment stockpiled in the Trans-Dniestrian region of Moldova and the completion of the destruction of non-transportable ammunition." (Istanbul Summit Declaration, Section 19, Nov 99)

By "recent progress," the OSCE no doubt is referring to the actions of the Russian government taken one week before the opening of the Istanbul Summit.
On 16 November, Russia began sending several trainloads of what it said was military equipment from Moldova to Russia. Valery Yevnevich, commander of Russian troops in Transdniestr, explained, "Today the first of 13 trains with military property leaves Tiraspol." (ITAR-TASS, 0814 GMT, 16 Nov 99; via lexis-nexis)

The Russian army also invited OSCE representatives to the area to watch as it demolished 56 now obsolete and rusting tanks. "Thereby Russia is meeting its obligations to remove military property from the Transdniestria in accordance with a plan that was earlier submitted to the OSCE," Yevnevich said. (ITAR-TASS, 13 Nov 99; via lexis-nexis)

The timing of these evacuations appears, at the very least, questionable.

This "progress" -- in fact a partial withdrawal with no guarantee of continuing after the summit -- took place more than five years late. In addition, there was no immediate way to confirm that the trains actually carried military equipment. This fact did not seem to trouble the OSCE, however.

The Istanbul summit's portrayal of previous OSCE declarations regarding Russian troops in Moldova is also troubling. The Istanbul Declaration mistakenly classifies the newest agreement as some sort of breakthrough. The 1999 Declaration is written as though Russia had not previously agreed to withdraw from Moldova, when in fact Russia has promised to do so on several occasions.

In its 1994 Budapest Declaration, the CSCE (now OSCE) wrote: "... the participating States welcomed the signature on 21 October 1994 of the Agreement between the Republic of Moldova and the Russian Federation on the withdrawal of the Russian Fourteenth Army. They called for the early entry into force of this Agreement thus permitting a timely, orderly and complete withdrawal of these troops from the territory of the Republic of Moldova."
"In view of the CSCE's commitment to promote good-neighbourly relations between the participating States, the CSCE will offer the services of its Mission in Moldova to follow closely the implementation of this Agreement by both sides . . . " (Budapest Summit Declaration, 21 Dec 94)

By 1998, however, the OSCE itself was forced to concede that little headway had been made on fulfillment of the agreement by the Russians: "As regards the military situation in Moldova, the Russian operational group now consists of approximately 2,800 officers and men. Some engineering equipment has been withdrawn from Trans-Dniestria, but the withdrawal of the arms and ammunition stored there cannot be said to have begun in earnest. The Mission's mandate calls on it to 'encourage the participating States concerned in pursuing negotiations on an agreement on the status and the early, orderly and complete withdrawal of foreign troops.' Such an agreement was concluded in October 1994, but it is not yet considered to be in force. Consequently, the instruction to the Mission from the December 1994 Budapest Review Conference to 'follow closely' the implementation of the agreement cannot be complied with at present." (Annual Report 1998 on OSCE Activities, 2.1.5 Mission to Moldova, 2 Dec 98)

The Istanbul Declaration also cites the 1996 Lisbon Declaration and the decisions of the 1998 Oslo Ministerial Meeting as justifications for crediting Russia with "progress." In fact, the Lisbon Declaration remarked upon how little advancement had been made: "Recalling the Budapest Summit Decision, we reiterate our concern over the lack of progress in bringing into force and implementing the Moldo-Russian Agreement of 21 October 1994 on the withdrawal of Russian troops. We expect an early, orderly and complete withdrawal of the Russian troops." (Lisbon Summit Declaration, Section 21, 3 Dec 96)

Two years later, the Oslo Ministerial Meeting also called for the "completion of
the remaining protocols of the Moldo-Russian Agreement of 21 October 1994 on
the withdrawal of Russian troops." (Seventh Meeting of the OSCE Ministerial
Council, 2-3 Dec 98, Decisions of the Oslo Ministerial Council Meeting, Decision
on Moldova)

By Istanbul in 1999, however, no reference to the Moldo-Russian Agreement
remained. Instead, diplomats wrote, "Recalling the decisions of the Budapest and
Lisbon Summits and Oslo Ministerial Meeting, we reiterate our expectation of an
early, orderly and complete withdrawal of Russian troops from Moldova. ... We
welcome the commitment by the Russian Federation to complete withdrawal of
the Russian forces from the territory of Moldova by the end of 2002." Therefore,
the new line in the sand is three years hence, while it would seem that there had
been no previous agreement to withdraw by 1997.

The OSCE, Russia and, for that matter, Moldovan politicians, are now able to
portray the latest so-called agreement as a breakthrough. In fact, the acceptance
of the 2002 date by the OSCE marks a dramatic softening of its position and a
diplomatic win for Russia.

What stock should observers put in this Istanbul verbal commitment? Why should
this latest promise mean more than a bilateral agreement signed five years ago?
Given Russia's inaction on this issue for five years, why should observers believe
that the flurry of recent activity will continue?

It should be noted that Russia has left important caveats in place that will allow
the country to drag its feet or entirely thwart implementation. To comply with the
CFE treaty, Russia must withdraw from two bases in Georgia -- Vaziani near
Tbilisi and Gudauta in Abkhazia. Already, Russian pundits are suggesting that
the Gudauta base must remain under Russian control to facilitate the Russian
"peacekeeping" force in Abkhazia. Having complimented Russian
"peacekeeping" efforts so highly at the summit, the West may now have difficulty
resisting such specious arguments. Similarly, Russian diplomats have indicated that the withdrawal from Moldova is conditional on the agreement of the secessionist government of Transdniestre in Tiraspol. A blessing from the Transdniestre regime does not seem likely to be forthcoming as it relies on the Russian military presence to intimidate the Moldovan government. Already, Transdniestre residents have begun to protest loudly Russia's latest commitment to withdraw.

There is ample indication that the recent evacuations from Moldova were intended for little more than show, leading one to wonder further about the seriousness of Russia's Istanbul commitment. Several Russian media outlets, most importantly Segodnya, noted, for example, that the announcement of the sudden withdrawal of armaments from Moldova represented a diplomatic feint in anticipation of the OSCE summit. The Russian army removed some armaments from Moldova "in a hurry," Segodnya reported, based on interviews with military spokespersons, because "Moldova intends to raise the issue of withdrawal of Russian troops from its territory at the [Istanbul] summit." (Segodnya, 16 Nov 99; via lexis-nexis) Moscow was clearly concerned about the international attention it would receive at the summit, regarding both its 1994 agreement with Moldova and its violation of CFE limits, and was attempting to mitigate the damage.

Western news agencies were not blind to the motivation. "Diplomats say Moscow, hugely in violation of its CFE treaty commitments with its seven-week offensive in Chechnya, wanted to offset criticism of its campaign by reducing its forces stationed elsewhere in the former Soviet Union," explained Reuters. (Reuters, 19 Nov 99; via lexis-nexis) While the connection was not missed, however, no action was taken to ensure that Russia's statements were more than just statements. And no mention was made of the fact that Russia was clearly in violation of the CFE treaty before its campaign in Chechnya began.

Apparently Russia's plan worked. The country's leaders went into the Istanbul
Summit knowing they were in violation of both their 1994 bilateral agreement with Moldova and the CFE Treaty, but they left having been given the right -- in writing -- to remain in Moldova for another three years. Not only were they not criticized, they were credited with making progress, praised for "peacekeeping" in the region, offered financial assistance to withdraw, and, most importantly, allowed to continue insisting that Tiraspol must agree before all troops can be removed. Russia and the OSCE have redefined progress. One wonders what the new standard will be in 2003.

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