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Frozen Conflicts in the Former Soviet Union – The Case of Georgia/South Ossetia

The war in Georgia in August 2008 has once again highlighted the significance in international relations of “frozen” conflicts in the former Soviet Union. The Russian invasion and dismemberment of Georgia has had dramatic effects on the Caucasian sub-region. It has drawn into question key aspects of Europe’s energy-security strategy. It shed harsh light on the apparent incapacity of international institutions (including the OSCE) to prevent conflict or its resumption. And it caused the most serious deterioration in Russia’s relations with the West in general, and the United States in particular, since the end of the Cold War.

This article addresses several issues: Why have conflicts in this region not been resolved? What are the risks that a frozen conflict might “thaw”, as occurred in Georgia? What does the conflict in Georgia suggest about Russia’s evolving role in the European regional system? What are the implications of the conflict in Georgia for regional security in the Caucasus and, more broadly, in the European and international systems? Finally, what does this experience suggest about the prospects for effective conflict management and resolution in the former Soviet region?

“Frozen” Conflict¹ in the Former Soviet Union

During and immediately after the collapse of the USSR, several conflicts emerged in the successor states. In 1988-89, war broke out in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh region in Azerbaijan, lasting until 1994, when a Russian mediation effort brought hostilities to a conclusion. This was followed a year later by the outbreak of a short war in South Ossetia, Georgia, that lasted two years before a Russian-mediated ceasefire ended active hostilities for a time. The end of the South Ossetia conflict in 1992 was followed immediately by a second civil conflict in Georgia, this time in Abkhazia. That conflict ceased in 1993-94 as a result of Russian and UN mediation. Elsewhere in the region, simmering conflict between the Moldovan government and the authorities of the region of Transdniestria escalated into civil war in March 1992, lasting until July of that year. 1992 also brought a civil war in Tajikistan that endured until 1997, when it was resolved in a comprehensive peace agreement

¹ I take the category of frozen conflict to cover situations of conflict where there are no active large-scale hostilities (although there may be smaller-scale violence), there is a durable mutually agreed ceasefire, but efforts to achieve a political settlement or peace are unsuccessful.

with Russian, Iranian, and UN assistance. The final major conflict in the former Soviet region was the war in Chechnya that began in 1994, was suspended in 1996, resumed in 1999, and endures at a low level to this day.

With the qualified exception of Tajikistan, none of these conflicts has been resolved through a durable peace settlement. Transdnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Nagorno-Karabakh have until recently existed in a limbo characterized by an absence of active hostilities, but with no obvious progress towards peace. The Georgian cases, as already noted, underline the possibility that, in the absence of a durable peace, conflict may resume and escalate, with serious consequences for the country in question and for the international system.

Two questions arise here: Why did these conflicts become frozen? And under what conditions might they resume?

With regard to the first, several factors contribute to the immobility of frozen conflicts. Frequently, the military balance between the sides is reasonably stable, such that neither side has the capacity to prevail. In political terms, the nature of intra-societal grievance, often ethnically based, is intractable. The experience of violent conflict deepens alienation between the communities in question as a result of ethnic cleansing or abuses of civilian populations. A deep sense of grievance is complemented by substantial fear and uncertainty concerning the risks of negotiated settlement. The communities in question, having suffered disruptive conflict, are frequently unreceptive to compromises of their aims that might be necessary in order to make the peace. Consequently, political leaders are reluctant to take the risk of proposing such compromises, and when they appear to be doing so, their political position may be imperilled.²

In economic terms, settlement and normalization may be resisted by those interests that benefit from “frozenness”. In South Ossetia, for example, the authorities oversaw a large scale smuggling business across the Russian frontier, with petrol flowing south into Georgia, and cigarettes, alcohol, and, allegedly, drugs flowing north into the Russian Federation. Normalization and the reestablishment of Georgia’s control over its border in this region would either have stopped this revenue stream, or the benefits of the revenue would have been transferred to those controlling Georgian customs and profiting from that control.

At the international level, outside powers may see an interest in maintaining the frozen status quo. Many analysts take the view, for example, that the persistence of conflict situations in the Caucasus has served Russian interests by providing leverage in Russia’s relations with these sometimes

2 The Karabakh conflict provides useful examples here. In respect of the former point, Azerbaijan backed away from the compromise proposed in the Paris and Key West negotiations in 2001 as a result of an extremely hostile response to compromise in Azerbaijani public opinion. Four years before, Armenian President Levan Ter-Petrosian was removed from office for proposing a deal that was unacceptable to significant sections of elite and public opinion in Armenia.

difficult neighbours. Moving farther afield, one reason for the weakness of external efforts to achieve peace is the fact that the interests of other – more removed – players (e.g. the EU and the major Western European powers, and the United States) in the region and in conflict resolution there are weak. For this reason, they have been unwilling to invest sufficient diplomatic attention and resources in their resolution. In the meantime, international norms regarding the use of force have constrained the states involved from attempting a unilateral settlement by military means.

Turning to ways in which frozen conflicts might thaw, the concept of “frozen” conflict is somewhat misleading. Social processes are dynamic. Although the negotiating process may be stalled, the situation surrounding negotiations is seldom stable. Underlying political, economic, military, and social dynamics may erode what stability there is, dramatically enhancing the potential for conflict as was seen recently in South Ossetia.

First of all, in most cases of frozen conflict, violence continues at a lower level. In all three cases in the Caucasus, for example, the image of frozenness masks frequent small-scale exchanges of fire between government and secessionist military units as well as some degree of inter-communal violence. The continuation of low-level conflict raises the prospect of inadvertent escalation. The danger is evident in respect of the Karabakh conflict, where unannounced movements of troops on either side have on several occasions provoked reactions on the other side that risked the resumption of hostilities.

Second, the balance of power may shift. In the case of Azerbaijan, for example, the government has not foresworn the option of using force to settle the dispute over Karabakh, and the rapid rise in energy revenue over the past three years has been accompanied by substantial growth in military spending. If it is true that the military balance of the 1990s favoured stability, then shifts in that balance may alter policy-makers’ incentives and calculations of risk in considering a return to active conflict.

Third, political change in states affected by frozen conflict may destabilize the situation. In respect of political transition in established states, new leaders may attempt to build support for their new position by promising to restore government jurisdiction over territory outside government control, as occurred in Georgia (see below). As for new secessionist leaders, they may see advantage in promising to achieve full separation. In each case, leadership rhetoric may go down badly on the other side. And the making of a promise carries with it the expectation on the part of public opinion that the promise should be fulfilled.

Finally, the international situation may develop in ways that affect a conflict’s intractability. If relations with a neighbouring state deteriorate, the neighbour may change the nature or degree of its involvement in a frozen conflict. Political change within neighbouring states may also affect their propensity for engagement positively or negatively. Larger trends in the inter-

national distribution of power may favour deeper engagement or the facilitation of settlement.

Conflict in Georgia: South Ossetia and Abkhazia

All of these factors came into play in the case of Georgia's short war in South Ossetia. In 2004-2008, there was a gradual deterioration in the situation, reflecting the changing economic and military situation, the calculations of new leadership, and the international context, notably Russian capacity and policy.

Although both the Abkhaz and the South Ossetian conflicts ended in the early 1990s, in both cases smaller scale violence continued, as noted earlier. In the middle and late 1990s, many ethnic Georgians (mainly Mingrelians) returned to the south-eastern section of Abkhazia to reclaim their land. They were accompanied by partisans who threatened the security of local Abkhaz government and police personnel. The Abkhaz responded in 1998 with a massive re-expulsion of several tens of thousands of resident Georgians, destroying housing, schools, and other facilities financed by international humanitarian agencies along the way. Likewise, in South Ossetia, the years of frozen conflict were marked by repeated exchanges of fire and other acts of violence between interspersed Georgian and Ossetian communities, despite the presence of the peacekeeping force.

On the economic and military front, the period subsequent to the Rose Revolution was marked by significant economic expansion and rapid growth in public revenues. A substantial portion of the latter was immediately translated into increases in defence spending,³ much of which was invested in re-training and re-equipping the Georgian military. Georgian forces were increasingly engaged in coalition operations in both Kosovo and Iraq (where, by 2008, they made up the third-largest contingent of foreign forces), gaining considerable experience of complex military operations. The development of increasingly operational and effective military capability changed the Georgian leadership's calculus regarding forceful solutions to their suspended conflicts.

On the political side, Mikheil Saakashvili came to power promising to restore Georgia's control over all its territory. The easy one (Ajaria) was handled quickly and peacefully. Little progress was evident in Georgia's other two cases (Abkhazia and South Ossetia). To the extent that public opinion takes promises seriously, the risk for Saakashvili from unfulfilled promises was loss of credibility. Managing that risk may encourage a return to violence, as was evident in South Ossetia in 2004 and 2008. In 2004, Georgian

3 In 2003, Georgian defence spending was 350 million US dollars. In 2007, it was 583 million. Figures taken from IISS, *The Military Balance 2005-2006* and *2008*, London 2005 and 2008, pp. 120 and 176.

forces established a number of new police checkpoints in South Ossetia, ostensibly to curb illegal trading. The Ossetians responded violently and the result was over twenty Georgian service personnel fatalities. The subtext was an effort to bring South Ossetia back into the fold.

In 2007, Saakashvili was directly challenged by his opposition in the streets of Tbilisi, reflecting growing disillusionment with the president and his government, a product of the lack of progress in the effort to reunify the country, but also of the marginalization of opposition views and the growing concentration of power in an increasingly narrow group around the president. Having another crack at Georgia's unresolved conflicts may have seemed attractive to the leadership as a result.

Turning to the international situation, after a brief honeymoon in 2005 in which Russia contributed constructively to the resolution of the Ajaria crisis, Russian-Georgian relations deteriorated rapidly, not least over the worsening situation in South Ossetia, as Georgia gradually attempted to reassert its sovereignty over the secessionist region. Georgia's accelerating rapprochement with European and transatlantic institutions were construed as an effort to (re-)join the West, exiting the Russian sphere, and were so perceived in Moscow. By 2006, Russia had tightened visa restrictions on Georgian migrants and was boycotting key Georgian exports such as wine and mineral water. The personal relationship between the two presidents took a drastic turn for the worse. Georgia spared no effort in underlining its independence from Moscow and its resistance to Russia's claim to pride of place in the geopolitics of the former Soviet region.

One key element of Georgia's courting of the West was its approach to international security operations, notably its engagement in Kosovo, Iraq, and, potentially, Afghanistan. This reflected an effort to create an impression that it was a producer of security as a willing and effective partner of NATO and the United States.

The payoff was to be movement down the track towards membership of NATO. In this endeavour, they were encouraged by the Bush administration. The decision taken by the NATO Council in Bucharest in April 2008, which denied Georgia's application to join the Membership Action Plan – widely perceived to be a guarantee of eventual membership – but guaranteed Georgia's membership at some point, provided decidedly mixed messages to the protagonists. From a Georgian perspective, the promise of membership, coupled with strong support from the Bush administration for Georgia's case, may have reassured Georgia about Western support in the event of Russian action in support of the secessionist territories.

From a Russian perspective, Georgia's (and Ukraine's) courting of NATO was simply unacceptable both intrinsically and because of its potential implications for NATO intrusion elsewhere in the region. Russia had resisted NATO enlargement *per se* from the mid-1990s forward. Although there was little it could do about the first two rounds of enlargement, consid-

eration of enlargement deeper into the territory of the former USSR (Ukraine and Georgia) came at a time when Russia's foreign policy confidence was returning and its claim to primacy in the former Soviet space was becoming more strident. Russian spokespersons, from then President Vladimir Putin to Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, made the unacceptability of Georgian (and Ukrainian) NATO membership blindingly clear in the months subsequent to Bucharest.

On the other hand, NATO did not extend a security guarantee to the two aspirant states in the interim. So, Russian policy makers may have sensed a window that was still open, but that might close. And it was clear that Russia was increasingly aware of the growing weakness of the United States and the corresponding hollowness of the US rhetoric of security support for Georgia. The irony, therefore, is that Bucharest may have encouraged the Georgians to solve their problem unilaterally, while encouraging the Russians to act against Georgia, and quickly.

The Role of Russia

Underlying this shift in the conditions that had served to stabilize Georgia's frozen conflicts was a more fundamental change involving Russia's position in the international and regional distribution of power. Russia had never given up on its claim to a privileged role in the former USSR.

But in its first post-Soviet decade, while Russia had the ability to complicate the situation in neighbouring states significantly, it did not have a reliable capacity to impose outcomes. Its economy had shrunk by approximately 50 per cent, while what remained was largely criminalized by those taking advantage of the haphazard privatization of state assets. In the meantime, the prices of natural resource exports (notably energy) plummeted throughout the decade, depriving Russia of foreign exchange essential to its process of economic reform. While, at the beginning of the 1990s, China's GDP was 60 per cent of the USSR's, in 2004-05, Russia's GDP was 40-50 per cent of China's. Russia's official economy was the size of Mexico's.

Russia's political system verged on disintegration in the early 1990s. At the centre, the presidency and the legislature battled steadily through the early years of the decade, culminating in the assault by the Russian armed forces on their own parliament in October 1993. In the absence of coherent or credible instruction from the centre, the subject regions of the Federation sought to maximize their own sovereignty and control over resources. The first war in Chechnya (1994-1996) indicated that the Russian military had profoundly deteriorated. It had difficulty in containing or overpowering an insurgency in a territory whose population constituted around one per cent of Russia's total. In 1996, the Chechens effectively forced the Russian government into an agreement that granted de facto independence to the territory.

Putin arrived in power with one major objective – to set Russia back on its feet. Much of his first term was devoted exactly to that purpose. The political system was reconsolidated around the executive. Regional powers were curtailed to the benefit of the centre. The legislature was emasculated through changes in proportionality requirements and via the creation of a loyal and dominant electoral bloc. In the economy, the influence of oligarchs was curbed; they accepted domestication, or they went into exile or jail. The state reacquired major stakes in the “commanding heights” of the economy. The reconsolidation was fuelled by unprecedented increases in the prices of energy and other commodities. The military has received substantial additional resources and, although hardly what it was in the Soviet period, it is showing signs of increasing cohesion, discipline, and effectiveness, not least in its intervention in Georgia. Underpinning this recovery was a strong ideological component, and emphasis on Russian national identity and Russia’s status as a great power. This underpinned the Russian claim to predominance in the former Soviet region.

As the Russian Federation made progress in pulling itself together, it began to take on a more assertive role in foreign policy. This was evident across the board in the re-embrace of multipolarity as a concept for understanding international relations, in an increasingly active diplomacy at the United Nations on issues where the Russian perspective differed from that of the dominant power and its Western allies (e.g. sanctions on Iran), and on functional security issues such as missile defence and the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe. Within the former Soviet region, Russia showed greater willingness in using the instruments at its disposal to limit Western influence and penetration and to curb the independence of its neighbours. The classic examples of the latter are the apparently political manipulation of energy export to the Baltic states, Ukraine, and Georgia, and also the trade embargo on Georgia mentioned above. More positively, Russia’s growing financial weight was employed in the effort to outbid Western interests on the matter of natural gas export from Central Asia.

In short, well before the 2008 campaign in Georgia, a trend towards a more active and exclusive policy in the region was evident. In acting against Georgia in 2008, Russia sent a clear message, notably to Ukraine, that further progress down the track towards NATO membership crossed a red line. Georgia was a convenient place to make the point, since the risks of military engagement there were several orders of magnitude lower than those implicated in any Russian action in Ukraine.

The Conflict and Its Aftermath

Turning to the chronology of events, Russia responded to the NATO Bucharest Summit Declaration by enhancing its already substantial ties to Georgia’s

two secessionist regions, permitting direct interagency contact between the Russian bureaucracy and their counterparts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The usual summertime low-level violence in and around South Ossetia resumed in June and July. However, it was by most reports more intense, and involved more frequent targeting of Georgian villages and security personnel, with the Georgians responding in kind. In July of 2008, the Russian armed forces held large military exercises across the frontier in the North Caucasus. The units involved (notably the 58th Army) remained in place after the exercises were completed and within easy reach of the major Russian route into South Ossetia. In the meantime, Georgia responded to the escalation of violence in and around South Ossetia by concentrating its own military in adjacent regions. Signs that the Georgians might initiate an escalation of the violence in an attempt to resolve the dispute unilaterally met with repeated remonstrances by foreign governments to the Georgian authorities not to give the Russians an excuse to invade by acting against Tskhinvali.

What happened on 7 August (e.g. the timing of Russian entry into South Ossetia and whether Georgia initiated the renewal of war or was reacting to Russian aggression) remains in dispute. But it appears that on the evening of that day, the Georgian armed forces launched a massive assault on Ossetian positions and on the city of Tskhinvali. Georgian artillery caused substantial damage to civilian residences and infrastructure and numerous civilian and military casualties, including, reportedly, a number of Russian peacekeepers. They succeeded in clearing much of the city of their opponents. The next day, claiming that an act of genocide and ethnic cleansing was occurring, and citing their duty to defend Russian citizens and their right to respond to attacks against their peacekeepers, Russia counterattacked, clearing Georgian forces out of the region in two to three days. They were followed by Ossetian militias who "cleansed" the Georgian villages of South Ossetia. Russian forces present in these areas did not interfere.

The Russians also advanced on the principal Georgian town south of the contested region, Gori, bombing it heavily and then entering it to destroy Georgian military bases and materiel. In so doing, they cut the major land transport links between central Georgia and the Black Sea. They then turned east in a slow advance towards Tbilisi itself. Russian air power inflicted substantial damage on civilian targets during this operation. Meanwhile, the Abkhaz took advantage of Georgia's difficulty to take those small sections of their region (notably the Kodori Gorge) that had remained under Georgian control since the end of the war in Abkhazia. Russian forces pushed out of Abkhazia and into north-western Mingrelia, and moved further south to establish positions in Georgia's major port, Poti, where they took the opportunity to destroy those elements of Georgia's navy and coast guard that were in their moorings.

EU mediation under the leadership of President Nicolas Sarkozy of France produced a ceasefire four days after the beginning of the war. In Oc-

tober, Russian forces outside the secessionist enclaves withdrew into South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The EU deployed a monitoring mission to Georgia to attempt to ensure there was no resumption of hostilities.

In the meantime, Russia recognized the two secessionist enclaves in Georgia and established diplomatic and security relations with them. The latter included an agreement to establish bases and to garrison each region with over three thousand troops.⁴

National, Regional, and International Implications

It is of course too early to make confident statements about the implications of these events. However, it is reasonable to assume that, for Georgia, the issue of reunification is off the table for the foreseeable future, as is that of NATO membership. Russian occupation of parts of de jure Georgian territory is more or less permanent. In the short term, Georgia faces a significant humanitarian challenge in dealing with large numbers of newly displaced civilians. The Georgian military has been deeply damaged and will take a considerable amount of time to repair.

The Georgian economy has also suffered severely. Estimates of actual cost of war damage run to one billion US dollars. There is also a potential long-term cost arising from the deterrence of further investment in Georgia's transit corridor. Ironically, the economic balance of the war may be positive in the mid-term. Since European and international institutions and their members were incapable of producing an effective response to the war itself, they have compensated with aid packages that dwarf the levels of assistance provided to Georgia in its eighteen years of independence. On the other hand, the war may slow the further development of energy transport infrastructure in Georgia, as investors may be deterred by enhanced risk and as partner states in Central Asia seek to avoid alienating Russia.

While the immediate political effect of the defeat for Georgia was a rallying around the flag, there is growing evidence that the country's political class is questioning just how it got into this mess and, perhaps more importantly, who was responsible. One might expect in the medium term that this might translate into reinvigorated opposition to the government of President Saakashvili, not least from prominent former allies including former Speaker of Parliament, Nino Burjanadze, who has recently formed a new opposition party. That may, in turn, produce a degree of instability in Georgia's domestic politics.

Turning to Russia, the conflict produced a dramatic consolidation of elite and public support for the Medvedev-Putin leadership and has reduced even further the possibility of the emergence of an effective opposition to

4 For a recent account of civilian implications of the conflict, see Amnesty International, *Civilians in the Line of Fire: The Georgia-Russia Conflict*, London 2008.

their rule. On the other hand, the short-term economic consequences of the Russian attack on Georgia were considerable. The Russian stock market declined dramatically in the days following the invasion, while there was a substantial increase in capital flight. In this sense, the conflict in Georgia was an early precursor of the impact of the current global economic crisis on Russia. Russian actions have damaged the country's diplomatic position with respect to Europe and the United States and make it more difficult to pursue mutually beneficial projects with the West.

In the CIS, it is reasonable to assume that one impact of the war will have been to dampen the aspirations of some of the republics to exit the Russian orbit. Russia's actions signal a willingness to do what is necessary to maintain Russia's influence in its "near abroad".

This last point raises important questions about the European security space and also European security strategy. Russian actions and their consequences also call into question the existence of a common European security space; Russian policy-makers appear to be pursuing a separate and to some extent exclusive sphere of influence in the former Soviet space. The war in Georgia also raises disturbing questions about the principle of co-operative security, which rests on the proposition that states in the European space deal with security issues through confidence building, dialogue, and compromise. Finally, Russia's invasion of Georgia challenges the OSCE norm of territorial integrity, leaving aside UN Charter norms on the aggressive use of force. Taken together, and viewed in the context of Russian discourse on multipolarity, Russian behaviour suggests a return to a rather traditional balance of power/sphere of influence logic of international politics.

In a more general sense, the war in Georgia may tell us something about the potential for escalation from the rekindling of frozen conflicts. Although one should be careful about drawing general inferences from single cases, at least in this instance the potential for direct escalation would appear to be limited. However, the conflict has increased tension between Russia and its Western interlocutors. The latter have responded with limited retaliatory measures (e.g. the restriction of EU-Russia bilateral discussions, and the acceleration of an agreement on the stationing of missile defence systems in Poland). The question here is whether action and retaliatory action may generate a dynamic of deterioration, as was suggested by Russian threats to deploy missile systems in Kaliningrad. The next phase will be the NATO meetings in Brussels in December, where the United States, in response not only to the war, but also to subsequent Russian rhetoric and policy, is reportedly planning to attempt to convince its allies to admit both Georgia and Ukraine directly to NATO, bypassing the Membership Action Plan phase. There is no question that any such action would provoke a very hostile reaction in Moscow. In this respect, the post-conflict dynamic carries a serious degree of risk to European security.

Conflict Management and Resolution in Georgia and Other Conflict Situations in the CIS

Mention of NATO brings me finally to the role of international organizations in conflict resolution after the Georgian conflict. Certainly, the OSCE and the UN did not cover themselves with glory during and immediately after the war itself. That is not surprising, given the organizations' decision-making rules and the presence of Russia at both tables. The EU, because of internal divisions on appropriate strategy towards Russia, also reacted in a lacklustre fashion, but, on the other hand, demonstrated its considerable potential in mediation and post-conflict stabilization. In addition, the EU, in co-operation with the United States and multilateral financial institutions, has played a key role in softening the economic consequences of the conflict for Georgia. The UN, working together with the OSCE and the EU, is in the early stages of attempting to establish a dialogue in Geneva among the parties to Georgia's disputes. UN institutions and the EU do have the potential to facilitate this dialogue through conditional assistance. However, the key remains whether Georgia, the secessionist regions, and Russia can find common ground they all share. International institutions provide a forum where they can make that effort.

Turning to the future, and to other potential hotspots, one ironic aspect of the outcome in Georgia is that it may have enhanced prospects for complete settlement of other frozen conflicts in the region, and notably in Azerbaijan. Since the summer of 2008, Russia has played an increasingly active role as a chair of the Minsk Group in attempting to facilitate a settlement, while highlighting the importance of the OSCE mediation process. This may reflect a Russian desire to show it can play a constructive role in regional security in the Caucasus. In the meantime, the war in Georgia may have softened Azerbaijani views on a compromise settlement of the Karabakh dispute. The war made clear the risks of leaving such conflicts to fester and has thereby enhanced incentives to achieve a resolution. Moreover, dealing with the change in the regional balance occasioned by the assertion of Russian power may suggest the wisdom of a more co-operative attitude towards Russian diplomatic initiatives there. Armenia, too, has shown considerably greater flexibility in its diplomacy, notably towards Turkey. This may be a result of a concern that excessive reliance on Russia for its security poses larger risks for Armenia. Regarding the multilateral process, however, what is important here is the shift in the attitudes of states and their allies towards the conflict, rather than the proactivity of the international organization responsible for producing a settlement. In this sense, and analogous to the nascent dialogue on Georgia, the role of the OSCE is rather modest: the provision of a forum and a process whereby states (and non-state de facto authorities) can work towards an outcome that is mutually acceptable.