

Confronting Russia? U.S. Marines In The Caucasus

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On August 21 the chief of the U.S. Marine Corps, General James Conway, arrived in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi to begin the training of his host country's military for deployment to the Afghan war theater under the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

"During the meeting the sides discussed a broad spectrum of Georgian-U.S bilateral relations and the situation in Georgia's occupied territory." [1] Occupied territory(ies) meant Abkhazia and South Ossetia, now independent nations with Russian troops stationed in both.

Conway met with Georgian Defense Minister Davit (Vasil) Sikharulidze, who on the same day gave an interview to the Associated Press in which he said that the training provided by the U.S. Marine Corps could be employed, in addition to counterinsurgency operations in South Asia, in his country's "very difficult security environment."

Associated Press reported that "Asked if he was referring to the possibility of another war with Russia, he said, 'In general, yes.'"

The Georgian defense chief added, "This experience will be important for the Georgian armed forces itself — for the level of training." [2]

Sikharulidze was forced to retract his comments within hours of their utterance, and not because they weren't true but because they were all too accurate. The Pentagon was not eager to have this cat be let out of the bag.

Three days later American military instructors arrived in Georgia on the heels of the visit of Marine Commandant Conway, whose previous campaigns included the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the first assault on Fallujah in that nation in 2004.

Three days after that Georgian Defense Minister Sikharulidze - former ambassador to the United States, head of the NATO division at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia and deputy head of the Georgian Mission of NATO in Brussels - who was appointed to the post last year by the country's mercurial leader Mikheil Saakashvili after the disastrous war with Russia last August, was sacked by the same. "Saakashvili criticized [Sikharulidze] for not doing enough to prepare the military 'to stop an aggressive and dangerous enemy' in possible future conflicts." [3]

Whatever led to the defense minister's dismissal and replacement by 28-year-old Bachana (Bacho) Akhalaia it wasn't due to his bellicose intentions towards Russia. In announcing the transition Saakashvili said, "We need a tougher approach. Bacho Akhalaia is the right man for the job" [4]

Immediately after being named new defense chief Akhalaia identified "three priorities of the

defense Ministry: ensuring peace, modernization of the army, and NATO integration.”

In his own words he said: “Modernization envisages the improvement of the Georgian army’s weapons and equipment, as well as the training of soldiers and officers. And NATO integration remains our only way. Georgia should have an army that will not be a burden on NATO, but will strengthen it.” [5]

The Civil Georgia web site reported on September 1 that the U.S. Marines in the nation had launched “intensive training” which would “focus on skill sets necessary for Georgian forces to operate in a counterinsurgency environment....”

The same report divulged that “A similar training program was conducted by U.S. military instructors for the Georgian military ahead of their deployment in Iraq. Georgia withdrew about 2,000 of its troops from Iraq during last year’s war with Russia.” [6]

The 2,000 U.S.-trained Georgia troops in question constituted the third largest foreign deployment in Iraq last year with only America and Britain providing more occupation forces. They were also stationed near the Iranian border. When Georgia’s invasion of South Ossetia last August 7-8 triggered a five-day war with Russia, the Pentagon transported the Georgian soldiers in Iraq back home for combat in the South Caucasus had the conflict not ended on August 12.

The U.S. Defense Department’s training and arming of the Georgian military started long before the deployment to Iraq and that underway for Afghanistan.

In April of 2002 the Pentagon instituted the Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP) under the broader Operation Enduring Freedom “Global War on Terror” campaign whose main target was Afghanistan. For the first nine months the GTEP was run by U.S. Army Special Forces – Green Berets – assigned to Special Operations Command Europe. In December of 2002 the program was passed on from the Green Berets to the U.S. Marine Corps.

Later the Pentagon created a Georgian Sustainment & Stability Operations Program (GSSOP) under the aegis of the Defense Department’s European Command, whose top military commander is also NATO Supreme Allied Commander. This program concentrated on training Georgia’s officer staff as well as soldiers for eventual deployment to Iraq, NATO integration and armed assaults against Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The GSSOP succeeded in all three of its objectives, though not to the degree intended in the third category.

The redeployment of U.S. Marines to Georgia, then, is indicative of a continuous effort by the Pentagon ranging over more than seven years to prepare the Georgian armed forces – an American and NATO proxy army – for wars abroad and in the South Caucasus alike.

On August 31 the latest mission began: “The ISAF program to train the Georgian military for implementing international missions in Afghanistan started at the National Training Center of the Armed Forces of Georgia in Krtsanisi on August 31. The 31st infantry battalion of the Georgian Armed Forces will pass a six-month intensive training to participate in NATO operations within ISAF, led by an expeditionary brigade of U.S. Marines....” [7]

On September 2 the newly appointed Georgian Defense Minister Bacho Akhalaia summoned (or was summoned by) the ambassadors of NATO countries in Georgia and he reiterated his triad of priorities. “The minister presented during the meeting the key challenges of the Ministry and discussed the priorities, such as peace, modernization and NATO integration.”

[8]

The same day a delegation of the German Bundeswehr arrived in the country and, visiting the Defense Ministry, discussed information technology. "The purpose of the visit is to integrate an informational codification system of the Georgian MoD with the NATO general system," an initiative "implemented within the framework of the Bilateral Cooperation Plan [of] 2009 between Georgia and the Federal Republic of Germany." [9]

During the same time it was announced that the American Marine Corps was sending a delegation to Georgia's neighbor in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan, which has also recently been levied for more troops for the U.S.'s and NATO's war in Afghanistan.

From September 14-18 U.S. Marines will "examine the training of the Azerbaijan Marine Corps" and "according to the bilateral military cooperation program signed between Azerbaijan and the United States, U.S. navy experts will assess the skills of the Azerbaijani naval special forces...." [10]

Another Azerbaijani news source added, "After getting familiar with the combat activities of the marine battalions of the Azerbaijani Naval Forces, they will make their own recommendations." [11]

Azerbaijan's navy is deployed in the Caspian Sea which is also bordered by Iran and Russia.

A week before, September 7-9, the nation's Defense Ministry will conduct a meeting of the Coordination Group on Azerbaijan's Strategic Defense Outline and it announced that on the same precise dates as the visit of the U.S. Marine delegation "A working meeting on creating the Strategic Defense Outline and supporting the preparation of the final document will be held in Baku on September 14-18 with the participation of experts from the US and other countries." [12]

On August 1 the nation's press revealed that "NATO and Azerbaijan are discussing the possibility of using the country's air space by the alliance's contingents to reach Afghanistan.

"'We are holding talks [about using the air space] with several countries including Azerbaijan,' said a NATO official, who asked to remain anonymous." [13]

The third nation in the South Caucasus, Armenia, is also part of plans by NATO to further integrate the strategically vital region and it too has been recruited for the Alliance's expanding war in South Asia.

On August 21 the Armenian ambassador to NATO, Samvel Mkrtchyan, met with the bloc's new Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen and "said that Armenia is inclined to develop partnership ties with NATO" [14] and "Armenian servicemen will join the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan shortly." [15]

The expansion of the Afghanistan-Pakistan war by Washington and NATO is pulling in regional states and increasingly vast tracts of Eurasia.

Last month General David Petraeus, Commander of the United States Central Command (CENTCOM), which is prosecuting the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, visited the former Soviet

Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. While in Kazakhstan, which shares borders with Russia and China, Petraeus met with his counterpart, Kazakh Minister of Defense Adilbek Zhaksybekov, and “discussions centered around building on the already strong strategic partnership that exists between Kazakhstan and the United States.” [16]

He also inspected the U.S. and NATO base at Manas in Kyrgyzstan, which had been closed to the Pentagon and its Alliance allies earlier this year, but the use of which was again secured by Petraeus in August.

On September 5 NATO is to begin a week-long multinational emergency management exercise in Kazakhstan which will include forces from the United States, Germany, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Armenia, Finland, Britain, Spain, Sweden, Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovenia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Ukraine. That is, a 20-nation exercise in Central Asia whose participants include six former Soviet republics and two former Yugoslav states.

In late August the Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the British Armed Forces led a delegation to Turkmenistan to discuss bilateral military cooperation.

The Afghan war is the center of a Western military operation that is broadening into wider and wider circles throughout Eurasia and in varying degrees taking in dozens of nations from the Chinese border and the Indian Ocean to the Black Sea and the Adriatic Sea. Nations being absorbed into this military transit, overflight, and troop recruitment and training network include all those in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) and the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia), the Black Sea region (Georgia, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania and Ukraine) and the Southern Balkans (Albania, Bosnia, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia) in addition to Afghanistan and Pakistan. With the exception of the Central Asian states (so far), all of those nations mentioned above have sent troops to the war theater or soon will, Serbia alone possibly excepted.

Kuwait and Iraq are also used to transfer troops and equipment to the Afghan war zone.

The above nations include several that border Russia, China, Iran and Syria, four of a small handful of states in the world not subservient to the U.S. and its NATO and Asian NATO allies.

On August 30 it was reported that Bulgarian troops scheduled for deployment to Afghanistan are to train in neighboring Macedonia as part of “Bulgarian-Macedonian-American training in the framework of the Bulgarian-American” joint arrangement for use of the military base in Novo Selo in Bulgaria. [17] At roughly the same time U.S. National Guard troops were in Macedonia training the nation’s special forces in exercises that were described as “enriching and building the battle skills of both armies.” [18]

While U.S. and Bulgarian military personnel were training in Macedonia for NATO deployments to Afghanistan and elsewhere, Macedonian troops were participating in an exercise in Serbia “involving medical units...with the participation of officers and units of NATO forces and Partnership for Peace members states.” [19]

In the second half of last month American servicemen in the Joint Task

Force-East, which is now based in Romania, trained with Bulgarian and Romanian opposite numbers “to build interoperability capabilities and develop relationships with other militaries in regional security cooperation.”

Drills were held in both Eastern European nations and “More than 3,800 Romanian, Bulgarian, U.S. troops and civilians [participated] in the three-month exercise.” [20]

The Pentagon and NATO have acquired seven new military bases in Bulgaria and Romania in recent years, including air bases for the transit of troops and weapons to Georgia and Afghanistan as well as for potential bombing runs against other nations such as Iran.

Last month a Bulgarian news source reported that the Pentagon “will invest in infrastructure and construction projects with a combined price tag of \$45 million for their Bulgarian bases” in addition to budgeting \$61.15 million a year ago for “construction works at its training area in Novo Selo.” [21]

Bulgaria and Romania face the western Black Sea across from Georgia and Abkhazia and offer the U.S. naval and air bases for current and future armed conflicts to the east and the south from the Caucasus to South Asia, the Persian Gulf to Northeast Africa.

Regarding Southeastern Europe in general, the new NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen last week identified the Balkans as a “top priority” and “said that his task is to get all of the Balkan countries into the Euro-Atlantic structure in the coming years.” [22]

In late August the U.S.’s European Command held a 40-nation exercise in Bosnia, Combined Endeavour 2009, to further integrate nations from the region and beyond into NATO. The chief military commander of NATO forces in Bosnia, Italian General Sabato Errico, said of the exercise that it was conducted “in the spirit of Partnership for Peace” and that “this exercise offers an excellent opportunity to focus on one of the key elements of the Partnership and the Alliance: interoperability. Allies and partners who participate in NATO-led collective security operations must be able to work together and to communicate effectively - exercises such as Combined Endeavour allow us to practice this.” [23]

Last week NATO chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen visited Turkey and pressured his host to provide more troops for the Alliance’s war in Afghanistan, stating that the bloc’s deployment there would last “as long as it takes.” [24]

On the same day Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu announced that his country would be more than doubling its troops in Afghanistan from 795 to 1,600. At a joint press conference with NATO’s Rasmussen Davutoglu added, “We are appealing to NATO countries to take measures against the PKK,” alluding to the counterinsurgency war against the Kurdistan Workers Party. [25]

The war in Afghanistan is developing in intensity and in range, in depth and in width. The August 29 edition of the British newspaper The Independent reported that the top military commander of American and NATO troops in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, will demand 20,000 more Western soldiers for the war. That is, after last month’s elections, the excuse for what were presented as temporary U.S. and NATO buildups over the past several months. Other estimates range as high as 40,000 additional forces. [26]

The new Chief of the General Staff of the British Army, General David Richards, last year

said “he wanted to see a surge of up to 30,000 troops in Afghanistan, including 5,000 more British soldiers” [27] and is now in a position to deliver on his demand.

Central Command Chief General Petraeus last month announced plans to launch an intelligence training center to be coordinated “with the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the (NATO) International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, and Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe” that will “train military officers, covert agents and analysts who agree to focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan for up to a decade.” [28]

Late last month it was announced that the Pentagon was reassigning its 3rd Special Forces Group (U.S. Army Special Forces), which has been deployed to sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, and now the “3rd Special Forces Group will be responsible for Afghanistan and Pakistan under a realignment of where the Army’s Special Forces groups operate.”

Moreover, “The 3rd Group’s new area of orientation will include the eastern and northern Middle East, which includes Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.” [29]

U.S. Marines and Green Berets have become regular fixtures in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Iraq, Kuwait and the Horn of Africa over the past decade. With the widening of the Afghan war they are soon to take up permanent residence in the capital of Pakistan, in the Caucasus, in the Black Sea region and the Caspian Sea Basin among other locales.

Notes

- 1) Trend News Agency, August 24, 2009
- 2) Associated Press, August 21, 2009
- 3) Bloomberg News, August 27, 2009
- 4) Ibid
- 5) Interfax, August 28, 2009
- 6) Civil Georgia, September 1, 2009
- 7) Trend News Agency, August 31, 2009
- 8) Georgia Ministry of Defence, September 2, 2009
- 9) Georgia Ministry of Defence, September 2, 2009
- 10) Azeri Press Agency, September 1, 2009
- 11) Trend News Agency, September 1, 2009
- 12) Azeri Press Agency, September 1, 2009
- 13) Interfax-Azerbaijan, August 31, 2009
- 14) PanArmenian.net, August 24, 2009
- 15) News.am, August 24, 2009
- 16) Partnership for Peace Information Management System, August 24, 2009
- 17) Focus News Agency, August 30, 2009
- 18) Makfax, August 26, 2009
- 19) Makfax, August 31, 2009
- 20) United States European Command, August 21, 2009
- 21) Dnevnik.bg, August 22, 2009
- 22) Tanjug News Agency, August 28, 2009
- 23) Southeast European Times, August 24, 2009
- 24) Deutsche Welle, August 28, 2009
- 25) Trend News Agency, August 28, 2009

- 26) Russia Today, September 1, 2009
- 27) Trend News Agency, August 28, 2009
- 28) Washington Times, August 24, 2009
- 29) Fayetteville Observer, August 27, 2009

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