

Georgian Militarization and Its Diplomatic Backing

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Former Georgian Prime Minister and Movement for Fair Georgia Leader Z. Noghaideli plans to visit Moscow again this February. According to Vzgljad Internet outlet, the purpose of the visit is to sign a cooperation agreement with the pro-government United Russia party. Noghaideli said in an interview to Vsya Nedelya it is time “to put an end to the useless confrontation with Russia and to establish normal if not friendly relations with it”. He said this is, among other things, necessary to address Georgia’s problems with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The same view is held (at list publicly) by the NATO leaders. Following the December, 2009 meeting between the foreign ministers of the alliance member countries and those of Ukraine and Georgia, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen called Georgia to open dialog with Russia and said this is what the country needed to boost its chances for NATO admission. Nevertheless, Brussels continues to support Georgia’s “territorial integrity” and military reforms. Discussions of the draft Georgian Strategies with Respect to Separatist Regions are underway in Tbilisi. The document seems to stress the humanitarian issues such as making it possible for the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to take part in US-Georgia student exchanges (students do need Georgian passports to get enrolled in the corresponding programs).

In the meantime, the “military reform” in Georgia is in full swing. Military and patriotic instruction at Georgian schools, which was abolished in 2007, has been reinstated. On December 26, 2009 Georgian President M. Saakashvili declared the country was ready to start training reservists. He said at the inauguration of the new building of the National Guards administration that a war is waged against Georgia, the country is facing a daily threat, and not only its military, but all of its citizens including women must be armed and prepared to resist and to turn every home into a stronghold. Saakashvili said Georgia had enough machine guns and rounds of ammunition to arm 100,000, 200,000, or even half a million people if necessary¹.

It is an open question how many Georgians are actually ready to risk their lives fighting for Georgia and its controversial President. Obviously, the mobilizing effect of the campaign asserting that Russia launched an aggression against Georgia in August, 2008 was modest. Nevertheless, Georgia has serious armed forces and special services.

The conclusion in the August Tanks study of the five-day war is that at present Georgia is continuing to implement the military programs launched before the five-day war. The orientation of the Georgian administration is growing increasingly anti-Russian, the overall objective being to confront Russia militarily in a broader sense rather than to regain Abkhazia and South Ossetia².

By the summer of 2008 the Georgian army numbered 32,000 servicemen. Its overland component – 22,000 servicemen – comprised five infantry brigades, an artillery brigade, an engineering brigade (in the formative phase), a special operations group, seven battalions (tanks and infantry, light infantry, medical, military police, communications, radar reconnaissance, supplies), and an air defense battery. The 5th infantry brigade was in the process of being formed (its 53rd light infantry battalion was through with 12 weeks of basic training only by October 3, 2008), and most of the best-trained 1st infantry brigade (2,000 servicemen) was in Iraq.

According to the budget data of the Georgian ministry of defense, as of the summer of 2009 the number of servicemen in the Georgian armed forces reached 37,800. Alternative sources set the number at 36,600, including 36,200 in direct military service. Georgia's ground forces count 23,000 servicemen (currently the officially stated figure is 20,500, but it does not include new formations such as the recently created anti-tank battalion). In contrast to the situation of August, 2008, at the moment practically all of Georgia's military are in the country and, apart from a plan to send a small contingent to Afghanistan, aren't going to leave it. Besides, the relatively new 4th and 5th infantry brigades have received additional training after the five-day war.

A separate artillery brigade #2 is being formed on the basis of the Khoni group of the Gori artillery brigade. The training of its personnel began in November, 2008. The 5th tank brigade is being formed in the western part of Georgia, the purpose being to strengthen the Georgian military capability in the Abkhazian direction. The process of personnel training in the Georgian army, its mobilization procedures and reserve training have been improved radically (Georgian reservists demonstrated a zero level of combat readiness in August, 2008).

On the whole the overland component of the Georgian armed forces added a regular infantry brigade (or three brigades, considering that two army-type brigades of reservists are being formed) and an artillery brigade, which means a buildup by a factor of 1.5-2.3. Since no embargo is imposed on Georgia, arming the forces should not be a problem for the country.

The analysis of the dynamics of Georgia's military budget confirms the above. It totaled 138.8 mln Lari (\$77.6 mln) in 2005 and 260 mln Lari (\$146 mln) in 2006. Interestingly, in 2006 the EU demanded that Georgia freeze its military budget since the countries more urgent needs lay in the spheres of health care, social welfare, and small business support, while the swelling of the military budget in no way benefited the population. Nevertheless, next year the military budget of the country whose President for some reason puts the EU flag in his office during interviews rose to 955 mln Lari (\$680 mln). It reached 1,350 mln Lari (\$965 mln) in 2008, and shrank by a third only last year – to 950 mln Lari (\$679 mln). Despite the contraction, Georgia continues to steer a course aimed at its total militarization¹.

Debates over the potential opening of US military bases in Georgia – and also in Azerbaijan – have become a recurrent theme. In the context of the already announced US plan to attack Iran, airbases in the region could be of great use to Washington. There are rumors that Georgia and Israel signed a secret agreement by which two Georgian airports are passed under the Israeli control, tentatively to target Iran's nuclear facilities⁵.

In the light of the above, the January, 2010 visit of Georgian Foreign Minister Grigol

Vashadze to Iran caused a sensation. The statements made by Vashadze during talks with his Iranian counterpart and with M. Ahmadinejad deserve careful analysis. Georgian foreign minister stressed that his country would never join a war against Iran regardless of Georgia's involvement with any alliances. In other words, Georgia is combining close military and political ties with the US with the cooperation with Iran, the country actively integrating into Caucasian energy projects. It is generally too early to draw conclusions on the development of the relations in the Washington-Tbilisi-Tehran triangle, but the question about the objectives of the current Georgian military buildup, the missions the Georgian armed forces are going to undertake, and their timing is quite natural.

It seems that G. Vashadze's visit to Tehran and Z. Noghaideli's visit to Moscow are meant to balance the overly US-oriented Georgian policy, which has already bred disasters affecting not only Georgia but the entire Caucasus. However, the initiative has been limited to words so far, and it is unclear whether anything practical will follow or all that there is amounts to a mere political show.

Notes

1 <http://www.georgiatimes.info/analysis/29358.html>

2 N. Poroskov. Coersion lessons. Vremya Novostei, December 3, 2009

3 V. Tseluyko. The Present and the Future of the Conflict Between Georgia and Russia. The Military Aspect // M. Barabanov, A. Lavrov, V. Tseluyko. August Tanks. Moscow. Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies.

4 <http://www.georgiatimes.info/analysis/29538.html>

5 <http://www.nob.su/2009/11/30/mishiko-ne-navoevalsja.html>

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