

NATO War Games In Georgia: Threat Of New Caucasus War

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On May 6 the Cooperative Longbow 09/Cooperative Lancer 09 US-led NATO Partnership for Peace exercises began in Georgia.

More exactly, the first half of the paired exercises, Cooperative Longbow 09, which is a command post operation conducted at Georgian military headquarters in Tbilisi. The second, Cooperative Lancer 09, is a field exercise and was scheduled to include 1,300 servicemen from 19 countries (Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Georgia, Hungary, Greece, Kazakhstan, Moldavia, Serbia, Spain, Macedonia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Britain, and the US), including 1,089 foreign troops and 214 Georgian servicemen in exercises at the Vaziani base of the Georgian Defence Ministry near the capital. The first started on May 6; the second will run from May 17-June 1.

This is the fourth in what have become annual Cooperative Longbow/Cooperative Lancer exercises, the first having been held in the former Soviet Republic of Moldova in 2006, the following year's in Albania and last year's in Armenia.

The exercises are referred to by NATO and the United States as routine and no cause for concern.

That the last two series of planning exercises and war games have been scheduled in the South Caucasus, and the current one in a nation that not only borders Russia but fought a five-day war with it only nine months ago, and that the military bloc running the exercises and its main member, the US, armed and trained Georgia before and have continued to do so after last August's war make Cooperative Longbow 09/Cooperative Lancer 09 anything but an innocuous occurrence.

Yearly multinational military drills in Russia's neighborhood by an alliance that is an effective belligerent once removed are events that are taken for granted by the West, though to gain an appreciation of how they appear from the other side imagine this scenario: During the Cold War era the Soviet Union initiated a series of annual military exercises in Central America with members of the Warsaw Pact and prospective members from three continents and every Central American nation.

The latest of those war games was held in Mexico in close proximity to the US border. A few years before Russia had covertly sponsored the overthrow of Mexico's elected president and had supported his replacement by someone who earlier had received a grant from the Soviet Foreign Ministry to study in Moscow and after completing his degree and practicing law there returned to his homeland.

The USSR then immediately deployed its special forces and other military units to Mexico to revamp its armed forces, training and arming them to be interoperable with Warsaw Pact nations for combat missions both at home and abroad.

Over several years the Soviet-trained Mexican army and special forces launched regular gunfire and artillery attacks across its border resulting in the deaths of dozens of civilians with US citizenship.

Then nine months before the latest Warsaw Pact war games in the country Mexico launched an armed assault against contested border areas, killing some 1,600 US nationals, displacing 100,000 more and precipitating an American intervention in which 64 US soldiers were killed and 283 wounded.

If the expression turnabout is fair play has any meaning, this imaginary reversal of events is a fair representation of how Russia is forced to view the current situation in the South Caucasus.

And that is precisely how matters are interpreted in Russia. Before the beginning of the exercises in Georgia Russian President Dmitry Medvedev warned that, "NATO's plans to hold exercises in Georgia...are an open provocation. Exercises must not be held there where a war has been fought," and referred to the Alliance's behavior as "muscle-flexing."

The Russian ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Anvar Azimov, said on May 8 that "NATO's ongoing exercise in Georgia is a downright provocation, since it is held in a region where a war was fought just months ago and where blood was spilt and civilians died." [1]

On May 5 the Russian Foreign Ministry announced that meetings of the Russia-NATO Council would be postponed indefinitely primarily because of the Alliance's exercises in Georgia.

However, on that day and the following two other meetings went on as scheduled.

NATO held a meeting with the chiefs of the general staffs of forty members and partners, including the Chief of the Georgian Armed Forces Joint Staff Devi Chankotadze, at its headquarters in Brussels on May 6-7 and the day before all forty military chiefs attended a session of the NATO-Georgia Commission to discuss Georgia's Annual National Program.

The NATO-Georgia Commission was announced in mid-September of last year only weeks after the August war ended, after a visit to the Georgian capital by the Alliance's North Atlantic Council, which consists of all NATO permanent representatives.

The Annual National Program (an equivalent exists for Ukraine) was designed by NATO last year as a substitute for the standard Membership Action Plan, the final stage before full membership.

The meeting of the 28 NATO and 12 partnership military chiefs and that of all forty, including Georgia and Ukraine, at the NATO-Georgia Commission occurred on the day before and the first two days of Cooperative Longbow 2009.

Before the Cooperative Longbow exercise started, however, four NATO Partnership for Peace members - Armenia, Kazakhstan, Moldova and Serbia - announced their withdrawal in deference to Russian concerns.

NATO Members Estonia and Latvia also withdrew for reasons not entirely evident.

Former member of the Russian Armed Forces General Staff Igor Korotchenko said that Cooperative Longbow 2009 “aims to improve ‘interoperability between NATO and partner countries,’ a euphemism for streamlining the Georgian Army and NATO coalition-force operations against the Russian Armed Forces.” [2]

On the day the first phase of the drills began the interior minister of South Ossetia, Valery Valiev, stated “We are most concerned about the full-scale NATO military exercise in Georgia bearing risks for the security of South Ossetia.” [3]

The day before Longbow began, Russia’s ambassador to the United Nations, Vitaly Churkin, “accused Georgia of provocations in the areas that are adjacent to Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

“As he spoke during a news conference in New York, he said Georgia was building up its military presence in the areas in question.

“According to Churkin, Georgia has concentrated over 2,000 Army and Interior Ministry servicemen on the border with Abkhazia, and also a large number of GRAD multiple rocket launchers and heavy machineguns. [Both were used extensively in the August war.]

“On the border with South Ossetia the Georgian military has also deployed heavy firepower equipment, armoured fighting vehicles and artillery guns. Some 2,500 Georgian servicemen are deployed on South Ossetia’s border.” [4]

At the end of April Russia offered to help protect Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s borders with Georgia “against a feared new Georgian attack that Tbilisi may be heartened to launch after a NATO exercise next month.” [5]

Deputy of the Russian Duma Boris Gryzlov “floated the idea of a response to the NATO move that would entail Cuba and Venezuela taking part in ‘large-scale drills’ in the Caribbean Sea on July 2.

“According to the lawmaker, the NATO decision to hold the drills in Georgia during the WWII Victory Day celebrations was a ‘total revision of the history of the Great Patriotic War’ and a direct insult to [the] country....” [6]

On the day the exercise started a delegation of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly was in Georgia to meet with the Deputy Defence Minister Goirgi Muchaidze, and the two sides “dealt with important issues related to sharing the experience gained from the Russia-Georgia August war and reviewed the present status of the Georgian Armed Forces.” [7]

The head of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly “urge[d] Russia to leave the occupied territories of Georgia [Abkhazia, South Ossetia].” [8]

Emboldened by this and NATO’s uncritical and unconditional backing in general, Georgian Defence Minister David Sikharulidze said “The exercises contribute to the Euro-Atlantic integration of Georgia and enhance the compatibility of the Georgian armed forces with NATO standards” and Chairman of the Georgian Parliament David Bakradze asserted that “Despite all Russia’s attempts NATO has not changed its decision [to conduct the exercises].

NATO has sent a clear signal to Russia that whatever the Russian position is NATO and Georgia will continue their cooperation.” [9]

Earlier in the month the Georgian ambassador to the US, Batou Koutelia, said in reference to any future conflict with Russia on the order of that of last August: “If it happens, we are determined to make responses together with our partners and allies, NATO member countries, the United States. And we will have a joint response to this.” [10]

Georgian Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze announced that on May 2 he had received a letter from US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton which “highlights the US position of unconditional support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia and Georgia’s integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions.” [11]

“US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton has announced that the United States government would fulfill all promises given by the previous administration of the US. Clinton spoke before congressmen at...hearings.

“Arguably, the Secretary meant one billion dollar assistance, which the Bush administration allocated to Georgia before handing over power to Obama. In the budget 2010 of the US, \$242 million will be earmarked for Georgia.” [12]

What as much as anything else lends credence to the concerns of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Russia about the ongoing NATO exercises, especially the field component that will begin on May 17, is the parallel to developments that preceded and contributed to the five day war of last year.

On May 15, 2008 a US warship arrived at Batumi on Georgia’s northern Black Sea coast near Abkhazia where “Georgian and U.S forces conducted military exercises together on the frigate USS John L. Hall.” [13]

From July 15-31 the US led a NATO Partnership for Peace exercise called Immediate Response 2008 in Georgia. The Pentagon deployed 1,000 troops from the Vicenza base in Italy, the largest amount ever deployed to Georgia.

“Called Immediate Response-2008, the manoeuvres are reportedly sponsored by the US Pentagon to the tune of USD 8 million.” [14]

“About 2,000 troops, including some from Azerbaijan, Armenia and Ukraine are conducting exercises at the Vaziani military base near Tbilisi.” [15]

On the Georgian side “1,625 Georgian military servicemen are taking part in a large-scale international military training, alongside US forces, known as Immediate Response at the site of the fourth infantry brigade of Vaziani base. This training is the first of its kind to be held in Georgia and is part of the joint Georgian-American project.

“William Bigaret, head of the US south European forces, said that the main goal of the training program would be to provide compliance between Georgian and American soldiers and develop cooperation between Georgia-US armed forces.” [16]

The exercises were timed to coincide with a major Russian one at the same time, Kavkaz [Caucasus] - 2008 which involved “some 8,000 military personnel, about 700 combat vehicles and more than 30 aircraft.

“The main goal of the exercise...is to work on...defense of Russia’s state borders, and to practice support of Russian peacekeepers in Georgia’s breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.” [17]

Troops from the world’s two major nuclear powers were within firing distance of each other. The Russian forces were in their own country; the American ones were several thousand miles away from theirs.

When the war games ended – just a week before Georgia’s invasion of South Ossetia and the war with Russia started – not all the US troops and not all their military equipment were removed from the nation.

As Immediate Response wrapped up, “The U.S. European Command said on Monday that there were no plans at this time to withdraw the U.S. military trainers from the country. There are still 127 U.S. trainers in Georgia.” [18]

Speaking about what occurred the very day after Immediate Response ended, South Ossetian envoy to Russia Dmitry Medoyev claimed that “Georgian troops that took part in NATO exercises in the region launched artillery fire on the South Ossetian capital on August 1, killing six people. There is a direct connection between the exercises of NATO troops and the latest attacks on us. And there can’t be two opinions about it.” [19]

One of those killed was a Russian peacekeeper from North Ossetia.

Six days after that, in the name of “restoring constitutional order,” US- and NATO-trained Georgian forces would launch a devastating artillery barrage on the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali and begin an equally savage ground invasion.

As the war was still raging Russian UN ambassador Vitaly Churkin, speaking at an extraordinary meeting of the UN Security Council initiated by the United States and Georgia, pointed out that “Georgia unleashed its military campaign against South Ossetia on August 7, following the completion of a joint US-Georgian military exercise, in which 1,000 US military advisers took part.”

Commenting on the name of the war games, Immediate Response, Churkin added, “Trained by their American colleagues, Georgian troops did just that, they responded immediately” [20]

A few days after the war began Deputy Chief of Staff of Russia’s Armed Forces, General Anatoly Nogovitsyn said, “The invasion plan was rehearsed and perfected during Georgian-American war games in Georgia.” [21]

At the very time the Pentagon and NATO were training their Georgian surrogates for the impending war in South Ossetia, 900 US troops were completing a series of war games across the Black Sea from Georgia in Romania.

“The month-long training at Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base, under Joint Task Force-East...included an airborne operation, live-fire exercises at squad level, military operations in urban terrain, joint patrolling [and] situational training exercises....” [22]

And occurring simultaneously with Immediate Response in Georgia the US and NATO

conducted Exercise Sea Breeze 2008 up the Black Sea coast in Ukraine, “incorporating 16 countries and more than 2,000 service members [in] a joint and combined maritime exercise held annually in the Black Sea and at various land-based Ukrainian training facilities.

“The air component, comprised of 17 aircraft from four countries, flew nearly 50 sorties. During the sorties, it completed 17 para drops of nearly 400 paratroopers, anti-submarine warfare operations and search and rescue missions.

“The maritime component, comprised of 16 ships from six countries, conducted maritime interdiction operations, air warfare, search and rescue, anti-submarine warfare, amphibious operations and mine countermeasure operations.

“Nations participating in this 11th anniversary of Exercise Sea Breeze include host country Ukraine as well as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Canada, Denmark, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Macedonia, Norway, Romania, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States.” [23]

After the war in the South Caucasus ended the US sent the flagship of its Sixth Fleet, the USS Mount Whitney, and the USS McFaul to deliver “humanitarian aid” to the Georgian port cities of Poti and Batumi, respectively.

Later in August NATO deployed a naval strike force to the Black Sea, eventually totaling as many as 19 ships, with the USS Mount Whitney coordinating the flotilla.

US warships in Batumi and Russian ones off the Abkhazian capital of Sukhumi were only 150 kilometers apart.

In October of 2008 a team of Pentagon experts visited Georgia and were “looking into the reasons behind the defeat of the Georgian army in the armed conflict with South Ossetia. American consultants had provided the Georgian military with state-of-the-art weapons and excellent training.”

“As they analyze the Georgian-American exercises and Tbilisi’s subsequent attack against South Ossetia experts argue that it was the success of those exercises that inspired the Georgian president with more confidence in his army and its military potential.” [24]

As a general summary of what preceded the Pentagon’s and NATO’s last major exercise in Georgia, a US Navy news source last September said, “For the past three years, several hundred American military trainers have run the GSSOP (Georgia Sustainment and Stability Operations Program), which has trained over 5,000 Georgian troops, many for eventual service in Iraq.

“The trainers were American soldiers and marines, who imparted their combat experience to the Georgians....The U.S. trainers, usually a team of 70 Americans taking a 600 man Georgian infantry battalion through a 17 week training program, concentrate on combat subjects.”

“Georgia has a population of about 4.6 million, and an active duty military of about 28,000 troops....The U.S. has been helping Georgia train and equip an army reserve force of about 100,000.” [25]

Washington and Brussels have invested far too much in their joint Georgian outpost and its ruthless and reckless leader to abandon them now. Just as the last NATO war games ignited a real war, so the current ones are reason for grave concern that the same may happen again and that a conflict may erupt between the world's two major nuclear powers that was narrowly averted last time.

Notes

- 1) Voice of Russia, May 8, 2009
- 2) Vedomosti [Russia], May 5, 2009
- 3) Ministry for Press and Mass Media of the Republic of South Ossetia, May 6, 2009
- 4) Voice of Russia, May 5, 2009
- 5) Itar-Tass, April 30, 2009
- 6) Press TV, May 7, 2009
- 7) Trend News Agency, May 6, 2009
- 8) Ibid
- 9) The Messenger [Georgia], May 7, 2009
- 10) Press TV, May 2, 2009
- 11) Rustavi 2 [Georgia], May 6, 2009
- 12) Rustavi 2, May 1, 2009
- 13) Rustavi 2, May 15, 2008
- 14) The Messenger, July 18, 2008
- 15) Ibid
- 16) Georgian Times, July 28, 2008
- 17) Russian Information Agency Novosti, July 16, 2008
- 18) Stars and Stripes, August 12, 2008
- 19) Interfax, August 6, 2008
- 20) RosBusinessConsulting, August 10, 2008
- 21) The Hindu, August 13, 2008
- 22) Army News Service, July 31, 2008
- 23) Navy NewsStand, July 29, 2008
- 24) Voice of Russia, October 18, 2008
- 25) Navy NewsStand, September 1, 2008

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