

NATO Expands Presence in Caucasus As Broader War Looms

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Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

On the sidelines of the twentieth anniversary summit of the Organization of Black Sea Economic Cooperation in Istanbul, Turkey on June 26, Georgia's President Mikheil Saakashvili met with his Turkish counterpart Abdullah Gul and, according to Trend News Agency of Azerbaijan, discussed "Issues of regional security and stability..."

The presidents also discussed regional - Transcaucasian and Trans-Caspian - energy and transportation projects engineered by the United States and several key NATO allies over the past twenty years.

President Gul also met with Azerbaijan's president Ilham Aliyev to deliberate over, among other matters, the increasingly volatile situation on the borders of Azerbaijan and Armenia and Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh, where over a dozen Armenian and Azerbaijani soldiers have been killed in armed clashes this month.

The unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic is supported by Armenia and although surrounded by Azerbaijan is near Armenia to its west and Iran to its south. The fact that deadly hostilities have of late not only occurred along Azerbaijan's border with Nagorno-Karabakh but with Armenia directly is cause for particular concern.

Standing immediately behind Azerbaijan in any war to "reclaim" Nagorno-Karabakh, as Azeri officials from the president down constantly threaten, is its ethnic and linguistic cousin and main military ally Turkey. Having conducted ongoing armed incursions and air strikes inside Iraq against the Kurdistan Workers Party, branded a terrorist organization by Turkey, the U.S. and NATO, and actively preparing for the same against Syria (which is defending its own territory), there is no reason to believe that Ankara would sit on the sidelines if Azerbaijan attacked Nagorno-Karabakh and in so doing triggered a war with Armenia.

Armenia is, like Azerbaijan and Georgia, a NATO partner (all three are members of the Partnership for Peace program, have an Individual Membership Action Plan and have deployed troops to Afghanistan under NATO command), but alone among the South Caucasus nations is also a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Russia's only security alliance in the former Soviet Union.

If a new and expanded conflict erupts between Armenia and Azerbaijan and Turkey backs the second and Russia the first, the threat of a direct confrontation between NATO and Russia would be a possibility for the first time.

Three weeks ago Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited all three South Caucasus nations - Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia - and in the third country pledged American assistance in

training the armed forces of the nation “to better monitor your coasts and your skies” and committed Washington to “helping Georgia give its officers the 21st century training they need for today’s changing missions.”

She also reiterated the U.S. and NATO contention that independent Abkhazia and South Ossetia (along with Nagorno-Karabakh and Transdniestria the so-called frozen conflicts in former Soviet space) are part of Georgia and currently “occupied territories” ; that is, occupied by Russia which has troops in both new nations.

In the aftermath of the five-day war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008 following Georgia’s armed assault on South Ossetia, Russian officials revealed that air and other bases in Georgia had been prepared for prospective attacks against Iran. Georgia’s military has been upgraded and transformed by the U.S. Marine Corps (and for a brief period before that by Green Beret U.S. Army special forces) over the past decade and 2,000 U.S.-trained Georgian troops served in Iraq and soon 1,700 will be in Afghanistan. The Pentagon has prepared the Georgian army for expeditionary operations in foreign theaters of war and, as President Saakashvili has repeatedly emphasized, made it a modernized, more battle-ready force for wars nearer home.

On June 25 Saakashvili asserted “we have real chances to become a NATO member” at the next summit of the military bloc, stating:

“The next summit will probably take place in 2014 and I think that Georgia will have a very good chance; I’ve never been so sure about it as I am now.”

After meeting with what NATO refers to as aspirant countries – Georgia, Bosnia, Macedonia and Montenegro – at the alliance summit last month, Hillary Clinton vowed that those states and perhaps others were candidates for full NATO membership, saying “I believe this summit should be the last summit that is not an enlargement summit.”

When Georgia joins NATO the latter will be in an immediate de facto state of conflict with Russia over Abkhazia and South Ossetia which, recall, in Clinton’s words are Russian-occupied parts of Georgia.

On June 22 NATO’s Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Transformation, Poland’s General Mieczyslaw Bieniek, visited Georgia for two days and according to the Georgian Ministry of Defence stated, “Georgia’s aspiration toward NATO has been once more confirmed at the Bucharest and Chicago summits and Georgia is making a lot of efforts on its way to NATO integration. ”

Bieniek toured the host country’s National Defence Academy, lecturing students on the role of the U.S.-based Allied Command Transformation, and met with the defense attachés of NATO member states in Georgia.

Three days before 28 U.S. soldiers graduated from a course at the Sachkhere Mountain Training School, a NATO standard and NATO-supported institution. The graduation ceremony was attended by leading Georgian military officials and representatives of the NATO Liaison Office in Georgia. The latter was opened in October 2010 and its purpose is, as described by NATO, to “Provide advice and assistance to the Government of Georgia in support of civilian and military reform efforts required for NATO integration” and to “Conduct liaison with Georgian, NATO, Allied, and Partner Authorities to enhance cooperation and understanding

in pursuit of the NATO/Georgia goal of Georgia becoming a full NATO member.”

According to a statement issued by the Georgian Defence Ministry last July, “Under PfP [Partnership for Peace] status the School will train military units of NATO and its partner countries’ armed forces.”

It added:

“In September the instructors of the Mountain Training School will conduct a mountain training basic summer course for military servicemen of NATO countries. The essential part of the course consists of practical exercises. Its aim is to provide soldiers with the basic mountain-technical skills and master them in operating under mountain circumstances. The exercise will be conducted in the English language...

“Under the schedule military servicemen from Poland, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia will undergo trainings in the Sachkhere Mountain Training School as well.”

NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow, a former National Security Council and Defense Department official and U.S. ambassador to NATO, is paying a two-day visit to Georgia on June 28-29, where he will meet with several major government officials, including the defense minister, interior minister and national security advisor as well as deliver a keynote speech at the Georgia Defence and Security Conference on June 29.

The South Caucasus, composed of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, borders Iran, Russia and Turkey and will not remain unaffected by military conflicts in the general region, nor will hostilities between states in the region not create the potential for far larger conflicts.

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