

The Militarisation of Oil Pipeline Routes: Georgia Prepares for War

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TBILISI TALKS OF PEACE AND PREPARES FOR WAR

A Georgian delegation comprising Defense Minister Giorgi Baramidze and Minister of State for Conflict Settlement Giorgi Khaindrava arrived in Moscow yesterday to explain the Georgian side's position regarding the disputes in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. And they had decided not to delay in providing explanations, because they made several very eloquent statements when they were barely off the aircraft. In particular, according to Giorgi Baramidze, "Abkhazia and South Ossetia are not so important to Russia as to ruin the relationship with Georgia for all time."

The first day in Moscow was free from official meetings — the Georgian minister settled down in the Russian Defense Ministry guest house and met with the press.

Talks with Russian Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov are planned for today.

Tomorrow sees talks between Giorgi Baramidze and Russian Armed Force Chief of General Staff Yuriy Baluyevskiy. The Georgian delegation is also due to have a meeting then with Andrey Kokoshin, chairman of the Russian State Duma Committee for CIS Affairs and Links with Compatriots, who visited the Georgian-South Ossetia conflict zone last week and came under fire near Tskhinvali. During his trip to South Ossetia Kokoshin observed what Tbilisi stubbornly denies: The Georgian side is headed for war and is assembling a military force on the approaches to the conflict zone.

As Khaindrava said at the actual airport, Tbilisi officials appear to be ready for constructive dialogue with Russia. "Georgian-Russian relations need to recover their former dynamics," and revive the warmth between Tbilisi and Moscow that was evident after Mikheil Saakashvili took up office and was at first actually developed during his February meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Minister of State Khaindrava said. In this connection Tbilisi saw fit to "explain to the Russian side" the situation taking shape in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. "I believe the Russian leadership will see that we do not want to inflame the situation," he said.

But in reality the situation is somewhat different. Georgia has actually decided to accelerate the solution of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian problems, as President Saakashvili has repeatedly said. Authoritative Russian experts believe that Tbilisi, making no particular effort to disguise its actions, is actively preparing for the use of forces against the former autonomous entities. Russian arms experts polled by Nezavisimaya Gazeta note that in

recent months Georgia has been busy replenishing its arsenal with Soviet-made weapons and ammunition supplied from abroad. This is the best option for Georgia, given its modest financial potential.

According to Russian military experts, Georgian ground forces number around 25,000 men, six brigades, and two battalions, and the personnel of four subunits have had training under the US "Train and Equip" program. According to the latest data, the Georgian army has 80 tanks, of which only 30 or so T-72's can be regarded as relatively modern, while the rest are hopelessly obsolete T-55's.

Moreover, there are 80 infantry fighting vehicles, 110 armored personnel carriers, more than 100 artillery pieces, and 18 Grad multiple rocket launchers.

Until recently the Georgian air force was also extremely weak: It had between five and 10 Su-25 ground-attack aircraft. Israel adapted one of the Georgian ground-attack aircraft to its avionics and this aircraft was named Scorpion.

Aside from the Su-25's there are 10 ancient L-29 training aircraft, which can be adapted as light ground-attack aircraft, and around 15 helicopters, including three Mi24 attack helicopters. Three years ago it received from the United States six UH-1 Iroquois multirole helicopters. Georgia's Maritime Defense Force is also a motley sight. It has around 20 Soviet-, US-, German-, Romanian, Greek-, or Turkish-built launches. The most powerful combat craft are two missile-carrying boats — the Tbilisi and the Dioscuria. The first is a Soviet 206MR project boat, obtained five years ago from Ukraine. The Dioscuria was obtained this year from Greece and it is a French-built Combatant-2 class boat from the early seventies, equipped with very significant weaponry. There is another launch, the Batumi, also obtained from Ukraine.

But the armaments situation in the Georgian army has changed of late. Weapons are getting bigger and more modern. Help has come mainly from the West. Under that Pentagon "Train and Equip" program, the Georgian army has received more than 70 pieces of heavy armor and a large amount of modern weaponry and equipment. Ammunition dumps are also being replenished. In particular, Ruslan Pukhov, director of the Strategies and Technologies Analysis Center, told Nezavisimaya Gazeta, last month Bulgaria delivered to Georgia by sea a consignment of ammunition worth around \$5 million, shells for howitzers and tank cannons, and hand-held antitank grenade launchers and grenades for them. Georgia is expected to receive another consignment of ammunition from Bulgaria in the very near future worth \$6 million. A Russian expert believes this is enough for several thousand servicemen for several weeks' military action. Both Tbilisi and Sofia deny that there have been any deliveries and there have already been reports of local militia members in South Ossetia capturing a Bulgarian-made grenade launcher from Georgians.

It is conceivable that the Georgian army will also get Israeli Tavor automatic weapons. During a visit to a Tbilisi defense enterprise President Mikheil Saakashvili announced that during his recent visit to Israel agreement had been reached on the purchase of the first consignments of these weapons. Georgia intends to buy several hundred Tavors for special forces, and then general forces' subunits will be armed with Israeli weapons. Moreover, Georgian military hardware is being overhauled at enterprises in Ukraine, whence Georgia is also receiving supplies of ammunition. Five helicopters will also soon be transferred from there to Tbilisi, having been overhauled at Ukrainian enterprises. Formerly Tbilisi did not

have any money to pay for overhauls, but now it is suddenly available. And here is some more news in the same vein: In the very near future the United States will supply the Georgian Armed Forces with modern communications facilities worth \$4.1 million in all.

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