

The Pentagon's Proxy on Russia's Southern Border: Georgia Gets New U.S.-Approved Defense Chief

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America and NATO's favorite autocrat, Georgia's Mikheil Saakashvili, "reshuffled" his cabinet on U.S. Independence Day and appointed Dimitri Shashkin his new defense minister.

Presenting Shashkin to his fiefdom's top military officers, Saakashvili, magniloquent and melodramatic as is his inevitable wont, waxed rhapsodic over his new underling being "one of the best patriots" and a "generator of ideas," as though the strongman-for-life would recognize an idea if it strode straight up to him and presented its calling card.

Saakashvili emphasized, along with the above-cited credentials, that Shashkin had been in charge of Georgian operations for the U.S.'s International Republican Institute before entering the government in 2009. The Georgian Ministry of Defense posted his resume on its website, which includes an over decade-long stint in service to his masters overseas:

2007-2009 International Republican Institute, Resident Country Director

2001-2007 International Republican Institute, Resident Program Officer

1998-2001 International Republican Institute, Assistant Program Officer

1997-1998 American Bar Association, Program Assistant

The International Republican Institute is funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, the State Department and the National Endowment for Democracy. It is precisely the sort of "non-governmental organization" employed to bring the likes of Mikheil Saakashvili to power – it has operated in 100 nations, for example in Egypt last year – and keep them there once installed.

Appointing a loyal vassal of Washington like Shashkin defense minister – Saakashvili attended Columbia University on a State Department scholarship and understands full well who needs to be pleased if a new "rose revolution" is not to cut short his now over eight-year reign – is to be expected from a leader who may not be learned or cultured, sapient or even shrewd, but is instinctually alert to which side his bread is buttered on and what his American sponsors demand of him. Which may simply be a question of acquiescence, as his choice might have been "suggested" to him by the U.S. ambassador in Tbilisi after Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Georgia a month ago.

In introducing the new defense minister, the Georgian satrap also praised his predecessor, Bacho Akhalaia, who is now the country's interior minister, for managing "to fully clean"

Georgia's armed forces of "hesitant elements with an old-style of mindset, who were ready to ally themselves with the enemy" in reference to a mutiny staged by members of a tank battalion stationed in Mukhrovani, thirty kilometers from the capital, on May 5, 2009, a day before annual NATO Cooperative Longbow/Cooperative Lancer exercises were to begin in the country. The enemy, there's no need to mention, was and remains Russia.

Saakashvili's and Akhalaia's night of the long knives resulted in 36 servicemen being arrested, one shot dead and two wounded.

Lastly, Washington's man in Tbilisi, Saakashvili, who is always a privileged guest in the White House, at NATO summits and in the op-ed pages of America's major dailies, touted the fact that his new defense minister's tenure with the International Republican Institute would yet further solidify U.S.-Georgia defense ties. The U.S., he assured, is planning to launch an "important, historic" military assistance program which will be of "decisive importance" to Georgia. The reference is to a pledge made a month ago in Georgia by Hillary Clinton to assist in upgrading the nation's air and coastal surveillance capabilities and air defenses as well as providing new military training and modernizing its helicopter fleet.

On July 1 Saakashvili spoke at a graduation ceremony at the new Cadets Military Lyceum and reiterated as he routinely does that the deployment of Georgian troops to Afghanistan under NATO command is primarily for the armed forces to gain combat experience for future military conflicts with South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Russia.

The Russian Foreign Ministry responded with a statement that in part said:

"It turns out that Georgia participates and increases the number of its soldiers in Afghanistan not at all for combating terrorism and for the purpose of supporting international security, as envisaged by the mandate of the International Security Assistance Force.

"Moreover, Saakashvili's words imply that the longer 'active combat' lasts in Afghanistan, the better for Georgia, which will have a suitable training range for its army to undergo combat training."

By way of summary, if Moscow's assessment appears too harsh, and to indicate the quid pro quo that Saakashvili receives from the U.S. and NATO for deploying two battalions to Afghanistan as other troop contributing nations are planning to withdraw their forces, here is a representative sampling of reports in recent years regarding the true purpose of the U.S. training Georgian troops for combat experience in South Asia:

Trend News Agency February 28, 2012

Saakashvili noted that participation of the military in the operation of NATO in Afghanistan is strengthening Georgia and its armed forces.

Civil Georgia February 3, 2012

President Saakashvili said that Georgia's contribution to NATO-led forces in

Afghanistan “has not been in vain” and resulted in moving U.S.-Georgia military cooperation to “a new level” that would help Georgia to increase its self-defense capabilities.

Speaking after visiting a Georgian soldier wounded in Afghanistan and now undergoing treatment in a military hospital in Bethesda, Maryland, Saakashvili said: “We should understand the fact that a decision has been made to move military cooperation [with the U.S.] onto an absolutely new level in order to focus actually on our self-defense is” a result of Georgia’s contribution to ISAF.

“Of course it is Georgia which we should defend and which we should care for and [Georgian troops] are in Afghanistan first and foremost because of Georgia,” Saakashvili said.

Civil Georgia September 16, 2011

Georgia’s military contribution to the Afghan operation gives the Georgian army “invaluable combat experience” and to the country the “solidarity and support” of its allies, President Saakashvili said on September 16.

In a televised speech before Georgian soldiers at a ceremony opening a new complex of the MoD’s National Defense Academy in the town of Gori, Saakashvili said: “If we want to have a country, we should have an army; if we want to have an army, we should be in Afghanistan.”

“Georgian soldiers are in Afghanistan because it makes the Georgian armed forces stronger, because this is invaluable combat experience,” Saakashvili said...

“[D]oes Georgia face threats and a huge challenge? Yes it does. Does Georgia need the army? Of course it needs it; the country can’t live otherwise. Should this army have experience? Of course it does. Do we need the support of our much stronger allies? Of course we need it. Where does this experience and solidarity from our allies come from? First and foremost on the Afghan front,” he said.

Civil Georgia September 13, 2010

The NATO-led operation in Afghanistan, he said, “is our struggle” too.

“Of course someone may say: ‘we have so many problems, our territories are occupied and there is no time now for going somewhere else to fight’. But because of these very same problems that we have we need huge combat experience, my friends, and the [Afghan mission] is a unique combat and war school...Take a look at our situation, our challenges and threats – can we say no to our armed forces and can we say no to a war school? This is an opportunity to become integrated with the world’s best armies, to see the most advanced [military] equipment and achievements.”

Azeri Press Agency July 28, 2010

“Georgia has a direct interest in the success of the Afghan operation and in putting a halt to terrorism once and for all,” Saakashvili said, adding that Georgia’s military could learn a lot from the “school” of Afghan warfare.

He said this experience could prove valuable in any future conflicts, citing the 2008 war with Russia as an example of “aggression” against the South Caucasus state.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty December 10, 2009

Saakashvili added that tough tours of duty in Afghanistan will give Georgian troops “a real combat baptism” that would come in handy in potential future conflicts.

Experts say combat duty in mountainous Afghanistan would indeed provide valuable experience for Georgian troops that could prove useful in the event of another war with Russia.

The Daily Telegraph December 8, 2009

Amid continued tensions with Moscow after last year’s war with Russia, the former Soviet republic is keen to strengthen ties with Nato and is making one of the largest contributions to the US-led surge in the fight against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.

Tbilisi is hoping the move will not only boost its links with the Western military alliance, but also give its troops much-needed combat experience that could be used in another conflict with Russia or with Georgia’s Russian-backed separatist regions.

President Mikheil Saakashvili said that Georgia’s contribution in Afghanistan is directly linked with the country’s security in the face of threats from Russia.

“This is a unique chance for our soldiers to receive a real combat baptism. We do not need the army only for showing off at military parades,” he said.

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