

US-NATO Militarisation: Donald Rumsfeld Returns to Georgia

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Only reported in English on the website of the Georgian Ministry of Defense, former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld visited Georgia for a week in late June.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, NATO's Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow, also an American, and NATO's Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Transformation General Mieczyslaw Bieniek were also in the country last month. During Vershbow's visit Georgian Deputy Prime Minister Giorgi Baramidze announced that Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen will visit his nation in Georgia.

Something is drawing top U.S. and NATO officials to the South Caucasus nation, as a six-member U.S. Congressional delegation also arrived there on July 2 to meet with President Mikheil Saakashvili and Deputy Defense Minister Nodar Kharshiladze and observe U.S.-trained Georgian troops prepare for deployment for NATO's war in Afghanistan.

Vershbow, former ambassador to NATO and to Russia and Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, was in the nation to attend the Georgia Defence and Security Conference on June 29 and was accompanied by Assistant Secretary of Defense (and principal adviser to the Secretary of Defense and Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics for matters concerning nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs) Andrew C. Weber; Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia/Ukraine/Eurasia Celeste Wallander; and Rear Admiral Mark Montgomery, U.S. European Command's deputy director of plans, policy and strategy.

In May Admiral Montgomery was the first to announce, a week before the NATO summit, that the U.S.-NATO European interceptor missile system had reached initial capability with the deployment of American warships equipped with Standard Missile-3 interceptors, a forward-based radar in Turkey and a command and control center at the U.S. air base in Ramstein, Germany.

Before the conference in Georgia, NATO's Vershbow met with Georgian Defense Minister Bachana (Bacho) Akhalaia to discuss the host country's NATO integration and its enhanced troop strength in Afghanistan, where Georgia will soon be the largest contributor of any non-NATO member.

Poland's General Bieniek, second-in-command of NATO's U.S.-based Allied Command Transformation, was also in Georgia for two days in June during which time he delivered a lecture at the National Defence Academy and met with NATO member states' defence attachés accredited to Georgia.

The American congressional delegation will “observe U.S. and Georgian service members training together in preparation for deployment to Afghanistan as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF),” according to a U.S. embassy press release.

The day before delegation’s arrival, President Saakashvili addressed graduates at the Cadets Military Lyceum in Kutaisi and his comments included:

“There is nothing more authoritative in Georgia than the Georgian army.”

The Georgian armed forces need to remain ever-vigilant and perpetually mobilized because “the one who wants to invade entire Georgia is not sleeping.”

“We will never have a huge army, but at the same time we will have up to 100,000 reserve troops, which will be ready to defend their villages, streets and neighborhood if we need it.”

On June 21 Rumsfeld returned to Georgia. His first trip to the country was in December 2001, eleven months after becoming U.S. defense secretary, following which visit the Defense Department launched the Georgia Train and Equip Program, at first led by U.S. Green Beret special forces, then by the U.S. Marine Corps and personnel of the British Army. The program lasted until 2004, when it was succeeded by the Georgia Sustainment and Stability Operations Program. Altogether, the U.S. and its NATO allies have refashioned the Georgian armed forces for deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan and for the invasion of South Ossetia and war with Russia in 2008.

On December 5, 2003 Rumsfeld was the first senior American official to visit the nation after the extra-legal putsch, known as the Rose Revolution, that later brought Saakashvili to power with a 96 percent vote the following month.

Two weeks after standing president Eduard Shevardnadze was manhandled and forced from office, Rumsfeld was in Tbilisi to, in his words, “underscore America’s very strong support for stability and security and the territorial integrity here in Georgia.” The comment was a hardly veiled threat to Adjara, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, whose leadership wanted no part of a “Rose” Georgia and whose presidents went to Moscow for emergency consultations immediately after the coup in Tbilisi of November 23.

He met with the “Rose” triumvirate of then-Georgian Interim President Nino Burjanadze, State Minister Zurab Zhvania (whose family accuses Saakashvili over his death in 2005) and presidential candidate Mikheil Saakashvili as well as inspecting the Krtsanisi National Training Centre near the capital where the U.S. had been training Georgian troops since the preceding year (and have been doing so since).

Even at that early date Rumsfeld advocated, although acknowledging that Georgia was a member of NATO’s Partnership for Peace program, it needed to advance further toward NATO integration, including full membership. With characteristic bluntness, he demanded Moscow “withdraw Russian forces from Georgia,” meaning small contingents of peacekeepers in Adjara and South Ossetia.

Nino Burjanadze, now in the anti-Saakashvili opposition, said of the meeting with the Pentagon chief: “We stressed that relations with the U.S. are of main importance for us. We also stressed that our foreign policy remains unchanged and accession to the NATO remains a priority. We thanked Mr. Rumsfeld for providing assistance to Georgia...”

Rumsfeld in turn said: "Georgia made a decision to work closely with NATO. This was a good decision. The decision was reaffirmed by the new leadership. We look towards the political, economic as well as military reforms that move Georgia's approach closer to the democracies of the West."

Making the most of his time in Tbilisi and not unrelated to the above, Rumsfeld also inspected a pipeline that was later incorporated into the Baku-Tbilisi- Ceyhan (Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey) oil transport project, described as the world's most politicized pipeline.

Six days after his arrival in Tbilisi, Georgian special forces entered into breakaway South Ossetia, in the word's of Britain's Daily Telegraph, "inflaming tensions in a country already facing the threat of civil war."

A week after his departure the first of four Georgian battalions trained by U.S. military personnel under the Georgia Train and Equip Program graduated.

In May 2004 Adjara fell into by then President Saakashvili' s clutches following large-scale Georgian military exercises conducted on its borders, with Saakashvili immediately threatening that Abkhazia would be next. Four years later Saakashvili attempted just that against South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but was thwarted by Russian military intervention.

In May 2005 Rumsfeld's commander-in- chief, George W. Bush, became the first and to date only American head of state to visit the Caucasus when he arrived in the Georgia capital with a 700-person delegation and spoke at a rally with Saakashvili.

His comments at the time, a clear attempt to replicate President John F. Kennedy's Berlin Wall speech of 1963, included the following, well worth recalling in regard to what has transpired in the interim:

"Your courage is inspiring democratic reformers and sending a message that echoes across the world. Now, across the Caucasus, in Central Asia and the broader Middle East, we see the same desire for liberty burning in the hearts of young people.

"In recent months, the world has marveled at the hopeful changes taking place from Baghdad to Beirut to Bishkek. But before there was a Purple Revolution in Iraq, or an Orange Revolution in Ukraine, or a Cedar Revolution in Lebanon, there was the Rose Revolution in Georgia."

The reference to Bishkek is an allusion to the so-called Tulip Revolution of March 2005.

When Rumsfeld returned to Georgia late last month he was greeted by Defense Minister Bacho Akhalaia, who briefed him on the transformation and upgrading of his nation's military under the auspices of the U.S. and NATO.

According to the Georgian Defense Ministry's website, during the meeting between Rumsfeld and Akhalaia "focus was placed on the enhancement of Georgia's defence capabilities and military education."

The two sides "also referred to Georgia's involvement in the ISAF mission and NATO integration perspectives. " Georgia's defense chief "extended his gratitude to the former Secretary of Defence for his contribution to deeper US-Georgia relations in the defence and security spheres."

Akhalaia further stressed that “the basis for intensive cooperation between the two countries was laid exactly throughout [Rumsfeld’s] service in the Pentagon, under George Bush`s presidency of the United States.”

A decade later, Rumsfeld was given accolades for starting the process of building a Pentagon-NATO surrogate army in Georgia, one which is now war-tested and ready for fresh conflicts.

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