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Preparing for War with Russia? Washington To Rearm Georgia For New Conflicts

by Rick Rozoff
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Recent reports in the Russian news media have detailed plans by the U.S. to provide the Mikheil Saakashvili government in Georgia with tens of millions of dollars worth of anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons.

The Russian government's Itar-Tass news agency and Voice of Russia have confirmed the arms package with officials from the Russian special services and the Joint Staff of the armed forces.

An official from the second source responded to the proposed arms sale by stating: "We deeply regret that the reset of US-Russian relations declared by the administration of Barack Obama does not change anything in Washington's military support for the Georgian leadership, which began the war in the Caucasus in August 2008 and which is continuing to mastermind aggressive plans against the independent states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia." [1]

The Georgian-South Ossetian-Russian war of 2008 was preceded by Georgian artillery barrages against the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali on August 1 which killed six people including a Russian peacekeeper stationed there.

That attack occurred within hours of 1,000 U.S. Marines, airborne forces and other troops completing the two-week Immediate Response 2008 North Atlantic Treaty Organization Partnership for Peace exercise in Georgia.

Six days afterward the Saakashvili regime launched an all-out assault against South Ossetia, timed to coincide with the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Beijing.

American troops and military equipment remained in the war zone throughout the five days of fighting between Georgia and Russia which began after the latter nation reacted to the deaths of Russian peacekeepers and South Ossetian civilians (who overwhelmingly hold Russian passports) caused by the Georgian onslaught.

U.S. military transport aircraft ferried home 2,000 Georgian troops deployed to Iraq - the third largest national contingent after those of the U.S. and Britain at the time - as the fighting was still raging.

Five days after the war ended, Joseph Biden - then senator and chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, now vice president - rushed to the Georgian capital to support Saakashvili and offer \$1 billion in "emergency aid" to the U.S. client.

After returning stateside, Biden, never reticent in respect to high-blown rhetorical excesses, stated:

"I left the country convinced that Russia's invasion of Georgia may be...one of the most significant event[s] to occur in Europe since the end of communism... [T]he continuing presence of Russian forces in the country has severe implications for the broader region....Russia's actions in Georgia will have consequences."

Later in the month the U.S. dispatched the USS McFaul guided missile destroyer (part of the Aegis combat system designed to fire interceptor missiles), USS Mount Whitney (the flagship of the U.S. Sixth Fleet) and a Coast Guard cutter to the Georgian Black Sea coast, immediately south of Abkhazia and not much farther from the Russian shoreline. The heavily armed warships were, if one trusts Washington's account of their mission, engaged in a humanitarian operation. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev accused the U.S. of bringing weapons into Georgia.

The American ships, joined by as many as fifteen other NATO vessels, and Russian opposite numbers deployed to the region were only some ninety miles apart.

Georgia's head of state Mikheil Saakashvili, a graduate of Columbia Law School in New York City, was brought to power seven years ago on the back of an extra-constitutional putsch in 2003-2004 that he and his supporters and admirers in the West refer to as the Rose Revolution.

He remains the preeminent American political client in the world along with Kosovo's prime minister and president presumptive Hashim Thaci, recently accused in a report to

the Council of Europe of being the ringleader of a grisly crime syndicate that trafficked in narcotics, weapons and human organs extracted from at least 500 ethnic Serbian and other civilians murdered for that purpose. An empire can be judged by the satraps it arms and in other manners indulges.

After Saakashvili's Pyrrhic attempt to eliminate the two barriers remaining to dragging his country into NATO - unresolved territorial disputes and the presence of foreign troops on its soil (at the time a small number of Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia and Abkhazia) - with the invasion of South Ossetia and following that an offensive against Abkhazia, the U.S. and NATO hastened to shore up their outpost in the South Caucasus.

In mid-September NATO's Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer and its North Atlantic Council (the permanent representatives - ambassadors - of all its 26 member states at the time) visited Georgia and, guided by the host country's defense minister, inspected air force and infantry bases.

During the trip, the U.S.-controlled military bloc signed a framework agreement on creating the NATO-Georgia Commission, out of which developed an Annual National Program to further Georgia's integration into the Alliance, an exceptional measure to circumvent the standard stages through which a candidate nation passes to achieve full NATO accession.

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

"Instead of drawing serious conclusions about the failed attempt by Saakashvili to forcefully resolve the many-year-old conflict [with South Ossetia], NATO has again demonstrated its support towards his [Saakashvili's] campaign of disinformation, and has promised to rebuild the military infrastructure of this country." [2]

Washington followed suit in December when then-Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Matthew Bryza announced a framework agreement on a U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership, which was formalized by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Georgian Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze in Washington on January 9, 2009.

In October of 2008 Washington deployed the destroyer USS Mason to Georgia for training exercises and in the same month the Georgian defense minister met with U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates on the sidelines of a NATO defense chiefs meeting in Hungary, after which it was announced that "U.S. military assistance will be aimed at strengthening Georgian air defenses." [3]

At the same time the Pentagon sent "an assessment team to Georgia to determine what role the US should play in rebuilding that country's military after its military conflict with Russia last August.

"After the assessment, Pentagon officials will review how the United States will be able to support the reconstruction of Georgia, including armed forces aid." [4]

Toward the end of the month a delegation headed by Frank Boland, head of Force Planning for the NATO Defense Policy and Planning Directorate, visited Georgia to meet with the country's top defense and military officials and prepare the nation for the next stage of NATO integration.

The month before, only weeks after the war had ended, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Eric Edelman told the Senate Armed Services Committee that "Georgia, like any sovereign country, should have the ability to defend itself and deter renewed aggression, and there should be not be any question about whether Georgia is entitled to military assistance from the United States or, indeed, from NATO or any of the NATO allies."

President George Bush supported Biden's call for \$1 billion worth of non-military aid to Georgia, which at the time was remarked would "dwarf the 63 million dollars that Washington provided to Georgia last year. Excluding Iraq, the infusion would make Georgia one of the largest recipients of American foreign aid after Israel and Egypt." [5] Georgia has a population of 4.6 million, Egypt of 80 million.

Until now, however, the U.S. has been cautious about rebuilding and upgrading Georgia's military arsenal or at least acknowledging that it is doing so. If recent reports prove true, Georgia is to receive a large quantity of high-tech weapons from the U.S., including surface-to-air missile complexes, Stinger and other portable surface-to-air missiles, Javelin third generation guided missiles and Hellfire air-to-surface missiles, the latter two designed for penetrating armor.

Three weeks ago South Ossetian President Eduard Kokoity warned that "Georgia only pays lip service to peace, continues to rearm and refuses to sign non-aggression pacts that can avert another South Caucasus war." [6]

According to Russian military expert Victor Baranets, "Georgia is buying anti-missile and anti-tank weapons because the 2008 war showed that these are weak points of the Georgian army." [7]

In short, the U.S. will provide precisely the weapons Tbilisi needs for a new assault against South Ossetia and a new war with Russia.

Saakashvili is now in Washington, where "the purchase of weapons will be the main topic of his talks with American leaders." His trip is centered on attending a memorial to the late White House Afghanistan- Pakistan special representative Richard Holbrooke in Washington, D.C. on December 14 at which President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will pay tribute to the deceased.

On January 12 Saakashvili became the first foreign leader to meet with the new speaker of the House of Representatives, John Boehner. The latter released a statement after the meeting which said:

"The American people will continue to stand with others struggling for democracy over the forces of despotism, dignity over degradation, and freedom over subjugation. " [8] His statement also expressed appreciation to Georgia for supplying the Pentagon with 2,000 troops for the war in Iraq and 1,000 so far for that in Afghanistan.

The Georgian leader met with other lawmakers, including Senator Joseph Lieberman, upon whom he bestowed the St. George's Victory Order. Saakashvili announced last month that he - not the mayor of Tbilisi - would name a street in his nation's capital after Holbrooke, a "trusted friend and confidant" who co-authored a piece in the Washington Post during the 2008 war denouncing what he termed the "full-scale Russian invasion of Georgia."

While Washington's favorite foreign head of state is being hailed and regaled with attention and praise in the capital, his foreign minister referred to a recent agreement between Abkhazia and Russia as "fascism." [9]

The day before he arrived in the U.S., Saakashvili said in an interview to a Ukrainian television station:

"As for NATO, I am absolutely convinced that this is just a matter of time."

"Nobody can ensure their security on their own, especially small countries, but I think this concerns Ukraine as well," he added.

After seven years of mercurial, megalomaniacal, adventurist, dictatorial and murderous rule [10], Saakashvili remains the Washington political establishment's pampered darling ne plus ultra.

At the NATO summit in November of last year, President Obama met privately with him the day before the NATO-Russia Council meeting with President Medvedev occurred.

Last July Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Georgia as Saakashvili's guest and lambasted Russia for "occupying" Abkhazia and South Ossetia, described as Georgian territories although neither has ever been part of an independent Georgia. In her own words: "We, the United States, was appalled, and totally rejected the invasion and occupation of Georgian territory. I was in the Senate at the time, and, along with my colleagues and the prior Administration, made that view very clear. We continue to speak out, as I have on this trip, against the continuing occupation." [11]

At a joint press conference with Georgian Prime Minister Nikoloz Gilauri ahead of the second omnibus meeting of the U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership in October, she stated:

"The relationship between Georgia and the United States stands on a foundation of shared values and common interests... The United States will not waver in its support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. That support is a core principle of our Charter on Strategic Partnership, and it is fundamental to our bilateral relationship. "

"The United States remains committed to Georgia's aspirations for membership in NATO, as reflected in the Alliance's decisions in Bucharest and Strasbourg-Kehl. We strongly support Georgia's efforts related to its Annual National Program, which promotes defense reform and guides cooperation with NATO. And we continue to support Georgia's efforts on defense reform and improving defense capabilities, including NATO interoperability and Georgia's contributions to ISAF operations in Afghanistan. "

"We continue to call on Russia to end its occupation of Georgian territory, withdraw its forces, and abide by its other commitments under the 2008 ceasefire agreements." [12]

Her comments led the government of Abkhazia to challenge her to acknowledge countries like Afghanistan and Iraq as American-occupied territories.

Later in the month a NATO delegation inspected the Krtsanisi National Training Center and its Simulation Training Center - built by the U.S. - in Georgia (where U.S. Marines have trained Georgian soldiers and where three Georgian soldiers were killed and thirteen wounded in an explosion this month) as part of NATO Days events in the nation.

Also in October, Italian Admiral Giampaolo Di Paola, chairman of the NATO Military Committee, visited the Krtsanisi National Training Center and the simulation facility to view training exercises of the Georgian battalion that would replace one serving under NATO command in Afghanistan. He also toured the newly established NATO Liaison Office in the Georgian capital.

In November Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Phillip Gordon told BBC: "We...recognize Georgia's sovereignty and integrity. We are absolutely clear with Russia, we disagree on Georgia. [W]e want to see an end to Russian occupation and...we stand by Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity." [13]

At the same time Georgian Deputy Minister of Defense Nikoloz Vashakidze was sequestered with top U.S. officials in closed-door meetings at the Pentagon. The "negotiations were held within the framework agreement on cooperation in the defence sector between the US and Georgia." [14]

As the Georgian deputy defense chief was in Washington, South Ossetian First Deputy Foreign Minister Alan Pliev warned:

"We are concerned about Georgia's intention to increase its military capacities. Now Georgia is planning to buy a number of Merkava 4 Israeli tanks, which are clearly not meant for defensive action.

"The activation of the Georgian Defense Ministry, increased flights of Georgian drones near the borders of South Ossetia, as well as the maniacal opposition to signing a non-aggression agreement give rise to the reasonable assumption of a newly designed bloody venture by Georgian authorities. " [15]

he official also stated that due to assistance from the U.S. and other NATO states the military-technical capacity of the Georgian armed forces currently exceeds that at the start of the war in 2008.

On November 16 the NATO Parliamentary Assembly met in Poland and passed a resolution referring to Abkhazia and South Ossetia as "occupied territories. "

The Abkhazian Foreign Ministry issued a statement in response which included the following:

"The Abkhazian party considers this biased interpretation of the events yet another manifestation of NATO's pro-Georgian position.

"NATO is an organization that has been contributing to the intensive militarization of Georgia for many years, stirring up the revanchist mindset of the Georgian leadership, which led to the August 2008 bloodshed in South Ossetia." [16]

At their meeting during the Lisbon NATO summit, Obama "thanked his Georgian counterpart Mikheil Saakashvili for his country's participation in NATO-led international peace efforts in Afghanistan and reaffirmed the United States' support of Georgia's territorial integrity." [17]

Saakashvili offered more troops for the war in Afghanistan, pledged that his nation's contingent would remain there as long as NATO does, confirmed that Obama backed his country becoming a full NATO member ("President Obama has supported Georgia's course that will lead it to joining NATO") and said that the NATO summit declaration cleared the way for Georgia to join the military bloc without the customary Membership Action Plan requirement.

The Lisbon summit declaration affirms that NATO will "continue and develop the partnerships with Ukraine and Georgia within the NATO-Ukraine and NATO-Georgia Commissions, based on the NATO decision at the Bucharest summit 2008, and taking into account the Euro-Atlantic orientation or aspiration of each of the countries."

On December 1, at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) summit in Kazakhstan, during which she met privately with Saakashvili, Hillary Clinton advocated "a meaningful OSCE presence in Georgia." In 1998 and until NATO's war against Yugoslavia commenced in March of the following year her husband's administration employed the OSCE's Kosovo Verification Mission, under the control of the notorious William Walker, to set the stage for the 78-day bombing of Yugoslavia and the wresting of Kosovo from Serbia. [18]

Also early last month, the NATO-Georgia Commission met in Brussels and Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister and Secretary of the National Security Council Giga Bokeria, representing his country at the meeting, stated:

"The resolution of the summit says that NATO continues to assist Georgia in carrying out reforms, recognizes its territorial integrity and sovereignty, and calls on Russia to abolish the decision in connection with recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia."

Afterwards, "issues of cooperation between Georgia and NATO were discussed at the headquarters of the Alliance, at a meeting of the Georgian National Security Council's Secretary Gigi Bokeria and the NATO Deputy Secretary General.

"The NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for the South Caucasus James Appathurai attended the meeting in his new status." [19]

As a footnote, "In 2003, after a visit to Serbia to study peaceful revolution techniques, Bokeria helped bring Serb activists from the youth movement Otpor to Georgia to train students in the same techniques. As a result, the youth movement 'Kmara' was established, which played a leading role in the November 2003 Rose Revolution." [20]

On December 3 the U.S. ambassador to Georgia, John Bass, was quoted as affirming: "The United States remains firmly committed to Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. We enjoy a strong defense relationship, defense cooperation, and we're currently working closely with the Ministry of Defense and other Ministries in Georgia to improve Georgia's ability to defend itself." [21]

Three days later Bass visited the Krtsanisi National Training Center and "also took a tour of the Simulation Center and attended model exercises on the ground." [22]

The American envoy is routinely present at send-off and welcoming ceremonies for U.S.

Marine Corps-trained Georgian troops deployed to Afghanistan.

In fact the Pentagon instituted the Georgia Train and Equip Program in 2002, first under Green Beret, then Marine, control in 2002 and later the Georgian Sustainment and Stability Operations Program three years later.

While still commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, General James Conway visited Georgia in August of 2009 to inaugurate the latest Marine training of the host country's armed forces. At the time Associated Press reported that when asked if the preparation could be applied "to the possibility of another war with Russia," he answered, "In general, yes."

Last September Saakashvili addressed cadets graduating from a new training center at the Kutaisi Military Base and stated:

"[S]omeone 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.. .and that [Afghan mission] is a unique combat and war school." [23]

On December 9 Associated Press, reporting on an interview with Georgian Vice Prime Minister Giorgi Baramidze, stated he was "raising the issue [of a "road map" to full NATO membership] in Washington this week with the Obama administration. " He further "said Georgia already behaves as if it were a member of NATO."

On the same day a bill crafted and introduced by Senators Jeanne Shaheen and Lindsey Graham, co-chairs of the Atlantic Council Task Force on Georgia, called "A resolution expressing the sense of the Senate with respect to the territorial integrity of Georgia and the situation within Georgia's internationally recognized borders," was presented to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. It refers to Abkhazia and South Ossetia as Georgian territories "occupied by the Russian Federation."

The next day Shaheen's and Graham's colleague Senator John McCain spoke at a conference titled "Forging a Transatlantic Consensus on Russia" at the Johns Hopkins Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at which he demanded the resumption and increase of arms sales to Georgia, stating:

"For two years, mostly out of deference to Russia, defensive arms sales have not been authorized for Georgia. This has to change. At a minimum we should provide Georgia with early warning radars and other basic capabilities to strengthen its defenses.

"Our allies in central and eastern Europe view Georgia as a test case of whether the United States will stand by them or not. Russia views Georgia as a test case, too - of how much it can get away with in Georgia, and if there then elsewhere. It is the policy of our government to support Georgia's aspiration to join NATO." [24]

Afterward, Robert Pszczel, the new director of the NATO Information Office in Moscow and formerly acting NATO Deputy Spokesman, confirmed that "NATO will continue its Eastward enlargement policy" and that "The NATO-Georgia Commission continues its work." [25]

In mid-December U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary Alexander Vershbow and Georgia's Vice Prime Minister and State Minister for Euro-Atlantic Integration Giorgi Baramidze met in Washington to plan Georgia's NATO accession. The Georgian official stated afterward that "Meeting with Vershbow is very important, as he is actively engaged in the issues of NATO enlargement, as well as personally ensuring Georgia's accession into the alliance." [26]

Baramidze, who studied at Georgetown University and was the country's defense minister in 2004, also met with members of the U.S. Senate on the bill discussed above.

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U.S. troops were in Georgia during the five-day war with Russia in 2008 and later in the same month American warships were docked in the country's ports as ships from the Russian Black Sea Fleet were deployed within firing range.

Never before have military forces from the world's two major nuclear powers been on opposing sides of a battle line during wartime.

By increasing the provision of sophisticated weaponry to Georgia, Washington is taunting Russia on its southern border and running the risk of a military conflict that may draw it into a direct confrontation with its main nuclear rival.

Notes

- 1) Voice of Russia, January 11, 2011
- 2) Civil Georgia, September 17, 2008
- 3) Civil Georgia, October 9, 2008
- 4) Voice of Russia, October 14, 2008
- 5) Ibid
- 6) Voice of Russia, December 22, 2010
- 7) Voice of Russia, January 12, 2011
- 8) Civil Georgia, January 13, 2011
- 9) Rustavi 2, January 13, 2011
- 10) Georgia: Simulating War Or Provoking It?
Stop NATO, March 16, 2010
<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/03/16/georgia-simulating-war-or-provoking-it>
- 11) U.S. Department of State, July 5, 2010
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Clinton Renews U.S. Claims On Former Soviet Space
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<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/07/07/clinton-renews-u-s-claims-on-former-soviet-space>
- 12) Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton And Georgian Prime Minister
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U.S. Department of State. October 6, 2011
<http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2010/October/20101006155724su0.2815777.html#>
- 13) Rustavi 2, November 11, 2010
- 14) Rustavi 2, November 11, 2010
- 15) RES Information Agency, November 13, 2010
- 16) Russian Information Agency Novosti, November 18, 2010
- 17) Russian Information Agency Novosti, November 20, 2010
- 18) Civil Georgia, December 1, 2010
- 19) Trend News Agency, December 2, 2010

- 20) Wikipedia
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giga_Bokeria
- 21) Civil Georgia, December 3, 2010
- 22) Ministry of Defence of Georgia, December 6, 2010
- 23) Civil Georgia, September 13, 2010
- 24) Johns Hopkins Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies,
December 10, 2010
www.sais-jhu.edu/news-and-events/pdf/johnmccain121010.pdf
- 25) Itar-Tass, December 13, 2010
- 26) Trend News Agency, December 14, 2010