

Knocking On NATO's Door?

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Relations between Russia and Georgia are more strained than ever following Georgia's signature on key agreements at the OSCE summit which underline a shifting alignment towards Europe and the United States.

Georgia signed up to several crucial agreements at the OSCE summit in Istanbul (November 18-19). Declarations on the Baku-Ceyhan and trans-Caspian gas pipelines have opened up a whole new world of opportunities for the republic.

Furthermore, Russia and Georgia issued a joint statement on the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty, signed in Istanbul, setting terms and negotiating conditions for the complete withdrawal of the Russian forces from Moldova and Georgia.

The Georgian media hailed the moves as one more step towards Georgia's full independence.

But the Russian media were less celebratory, issuing 'an open threat' based on accusations that Georgia and Azerbaijan are aiding 'terrorists' in the breakaway Russian republic of Chechnya.

Given its geographical position, a compliant Georgia is key to Russian influence across the Caucasus. Linked with Turkey, Iran and her strategic partner, Armenia, Russia would continue to influence every ongoing process in the Near East and would wield considerable influence along the Euro-Asian economic corridor.

But the proposed pipelines and sustained pressure to downgrade her military presence in the region have begun to chip away at Russia's position. Russia risks losing her dominant influence in the Caucasus, should a fully independent Georgia emerge.

Neighbouring North Caucasian nations may be inspired to follow suit and seek a route to the outside world that bypasses Russia.

With this in mind, the motive behind Russia's repeated accusations of Georgian collusion with Chechen militants becomes all too clear. Such accusations are part and parcel of Russia's increasingly vocal campaign in support of her military presence in Georgia. Russia is preparing the ideological ground for a final blow to Georgian independence.

On March 12, 1995 the then Russian defence minister Pavel Grachev and his Georgian counterpart, Vardiko Nadibaidze, initialed an agreement on "the location of Russia's military bases in Georgia".

According to the agreement four military bases were to be located on Georgian territory - Vasiani, a large airbase 15 kilometres from Tblisi, Gudauta in separatist Abkhazia, Batumi in Adjara and Akhalkalaki in the predominantly ethnic Armenian southern region of Georgia. Under the agreement Russia would control the bases for 25 years.

The deal was not well received at home. Nodar Natadze, Chairman of the Parliamentary National Defence and Security Committee at the time, described the deal as the greatest crime committed against Georgia

this century. Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze had to vow on national television that he would only ratify the agreement if Russia assisted in the restoration of Georgian territorial integrity.

But Shevardnadze failed to keep that vow. Georgia's territorial integrity was not restored. On September 15, 1995 Shevardnadze ratified the agreement with then Russian prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin together with a protocol "transferring additional cities to Russia's military sub-units".

According to secret unpublished protocol, Russia was granted permission to locate military bases in three additional regions - Senaki, Telavi and Akhalqalaki. In fact, Georgia and Russia have signed more than 43 military agreements since 1995, but not one has been ratified by the Georgian parliament.

In the run-up to the elections on October 31 the removal of Russian bases was a key campaign promise for virtually every hopeful candidate. Shevardnadze, true to form, preferred to make vague and non-committal statements on the issue. The president claimed Georgia would "knock on NATO's door in 2005".

Then Shevardnadze qualified this statement by saying that knocking on the door means one thing and entering another, adding that NATO membership required serious preparation.

The mere mention of "knocking" on NATO's door produced a storm of media criticism in Russia. The Moscow daily Nezavisimaya Gazeta wrote "Georgia's President declared that his country will become a NATO member by 2005 and the Azeri government intends to locate a U.S. military base near Baku. Should NATO troops be located in the Caucasus, we will witness the rise of separatism in the North Caucasus".

Again, such views were badly received in Georgia. Russian General Vyacheslav Borisov did the pro-Russian Revivalist/Batumi Alliance political bloc no favours when he claimed that a Batumi Alliance victory would guarantee Russian military presence in the country for 25-30 years. Borisov's comments provoked fury among the electorate and wiped out the Alliance's electoral prospects.

Russia's continued military presence in Georgia is considered a constant threat to stability in the North Caucasus. Negotiations on the subject in Istanbul were fraught with difficulty and dragged on through the night before a consensus was agreed.

In 1992-93, during the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, the Georgian Defence and Security Committee Chairman, Revaz Adamia, claimed that Abkhaz separatists were receiving supplies from Gudauta military base. And on August 29, 1995 Shevardnadze nearly assassinated. Days later one of the prime suspects, pro-Russian former Security Minister Igor Giorgadze, left Georgia from Vaziani military base. Giorgadze is still in hiding.

Again on February 9, 1998 another attempt was made on Shevardnadze's life and again fingers were pointed at Russia. On February 8 an unidentified aircraft had landed at Vaziani airbase. The aircraft left on February 10 and Russian officials refused to comment on the nature of the flight, other than to say 'someone came for talks'.

Adamia claims Russia's Vaziani base is a weapons smuggling centre. He claims weapons were smuggled into Chechnya, Armenia and probably Azerbaijan during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. "There is a lack of political interest here", Adamia said. "Weapons are being sold to all parties from here".

The coup d'etat in Azerbaijan in 1993 was planned at the Russian base in Gyandzha. But the new Azeri President, Heydar Aliiev, brought to power with Russian assistance, has proven to be as pro-Western and pro-Turkey orientated as his predecessor. Accusations abound of repeated unsuccessful Russian attempts to remove Aliiev.

There are currently 10,663 Russian troops in the Trans-Caucasus (Georgia and Armenia) 4,947 of them in Georgia. There are 141 tanks, 437 armoured vehicles, 155 artillery pieces and 10 military helicopters in Georgia. A central office in Tblisi controls the Russian bases in Georgia. But the Gudauta military base in Abkhazia, which houses 142 armoured vehicles and 11 artillery pieces, is under the command of Russian paratroop headquarters in Moscow.

According to the terms of the agreement signed in Istanbul Russian military equipment in Georgia must not exceed 153 tanks, 241 armoured vehicles and 140 artillery pieces by December 31, 2000. The military bases at Vaziani and Gudauta and the tank maintenance plant in Tblisi must be withdrawn by December 31, 2000. OSCE member countries will provide financial assistance for the programme.

A decision on the Akhalkalali and Batumi bases will be negotiated during the coming year. Adamia has said these bases will remain in Georgia for only three years at the most. But Georgian officials hope part of the Russian military hardware will stay behind in Georgia when Russian troops withdraw.

The Georgian government also hopes to receive Western support and assistance during negotiations with Russia over the proposed troop withdrawals. The U.S. Congress National Library's Strategic Center recommended to Congress that financing to Georgia should increase over the next 2-3 years to ensure "Georgia's political and military integration into NATO and Western structures as soon as possible".

A genuine fear that such "integration" may provoke an aggressive response from Russia will not, however, hinder Georgia's push for greater autonomy from her northern neighbour - or its willingness to use US weaponry to do it.

On the eve of the October election, the Speaker of the Georgian Parliament, Zurab Zhvania joined his three-year-old son for a joyride on a US military helicopter. Asked why, he quipped: "My son has to get used to U.S. and NATO military equipment".

Location: Caucasus
Turkey
Stavropol
South Ossetia

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