
Georgia's Strategic Partner Gets Help When It Needs It.

By Vladimir Socor
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Georgia is boosting its troop contributions to U.S.- and NATO-led operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, President Mikheil Saakashvili announced on March 9 while on a visit to Japan. The Georgian parliament is likely to approve the president's forthcoming request by a wide margin.

In Tbilisi, three influential parliamentarians from the president's inner circle -- Givi Targamadze, Nika Rurua, and Davit Bakradze -- presented this decision as intended to cement Georgia's strategic partnership with the United States and NATO. 'Our strategic partner needs help. This is why we are doing this when help is most needed' (Rurua); 'It is a very clear message from us, confirming this partnership' (Targamadze); 'This is a situation in which our national interests and international obligations fully coincide' (Bakradze). 'This will be the decisive year in terms of stabilizing Iraq [and] we want to do everything possible to help,' Georgian Ambassador Davit Sikharulidze stated in announcing the decision in Washington (Imedi Television, Rustavi-2, March 9).

The rationale is similar to that of the Baltic states in supporting U.S.- and NATO-led operations. It is based on an implicit expectation of reciprocity in hypothetical situations in which these countries might one day find themselves vis-à-vis Russia. Thus Georgia, like the Baltic states, is earning a strong title to such reciprocity in future contingencies.

Georgia has decided to increase its troop deployment in Iraq to 2,000, from its current 850. Correlated with the time-limited U.S. operation to stabilize Baghdad and some other areas, the Georgian troop increase is therefore planned to last one year. Georgia's decision contrasts with the decisions of other countries -- including NATO members Britain, Poland, Denmark -- to reduce their contingents or withdraw them altogether from Iraq last year and this. Thus, Georgia's contribution is partly offsetting those reductions.

Georgian troops are based in Baghdad and Baquba at present. With those 850 soldiers, Georgia is already the second-largest troop contributor within the U.S.-led coalition, relative to the contributing countries' population. Georgia is set to become the largest troop contributor among coalition countries on a per capita basis after its additional deployment. Georgia first deployed its soldiers to Iraq in August 2003. Eighteen Georgian soldiers have been injured in combat since then (Civil Georgia, March 9).

The Georgian government is currently consulting with NATO and its International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan regarding the deployment of 100 Georgian military personnel to that country, with a possible increase to 200 afterward. The number might increase further in 2008, once the ongoing large-scale security operation in Baghdad will have been completed.

Georgia initiated this offer to the Alliance unofficially last November during NATO's summit in Riga and officially in December 2006. It became part of the NATO-Georgia Intensified Dialogue on Membership Issues, thus linked directly with Georgia's aspirations to join the Alliance as a member.

While some other coalition countries are augmenting their contingents

in Afghanistan at the expense of troop reductions in Iraq, Georgia is initiating substantial net increases in both places simultaneously.

According to First Deputy Defense Minister Levan Nikoleishvili, Georgia is ready to deploy a mix of infantry troops, military engineers, and military medical personnel to serve jointly with the contingent of a NATO member-state in Afghanistan. Discussions are under way with Germany, France, and Lithuania. The Lithuanian option, recently discussed by a high-level Lithuanian delegation in Tbilisi, would involve Georgian deployment with the Lithuanian-led Provincial Reconstruction Team in Chaghcharan, Ghor province, as part of the NATO-commanded ISAF (see EDM, February 5).

A platoon-size Georgian unit had served in Afghanistan in 2004 when ISAF temporarily increased its troops during the general elections there. The Georgians operated with a British battalion in Afghanistan at that time.

Georgia also deploys a company-size unit in Kosovo with the German-led brigade, in the framework of the NATO-commanded Kosovo Force.

These contributions to U.S. and NATO operations illustrate Georgia's advance from the role of full consumer of security to that of net provider of security. U.S. and Allied assistance to Georgia made this advance possible in the first place. While still a security consumer in the broad strategic sense, Georgia evolved in a short period to regional provider, offering and securing vital transit routes for Allied power projection in Eurasia and energy corridors for Caspian energy to Europe, in tandem with neighboring Azerbaijan. At this stage, Georgia is turning into a net security provider in other theaters as well, beyond its own region.

As the Baltic states did during their candidacy for NATO membership, Georgia is behaving as de facto member of NATO -- and, in many ways, more actively than many member countries -- even before the official accession to the alliance.
