
Like Its Neighbors, Georgia Is Growing Its Military, But For Better Reasons

By M. Alkhazashvili, translated by Diana Dundua
Messenger.ge, Georgia - 14/9/2007

The nations of the South Caucasus are rapidly increasing military expenditures. Armenia and Azerbaijan are preparing for a tragically likely second war, while Georgia is focused on NATO accession.

Georgia's parliament is expected to soon approve an increase on the legislative cap on troops under the Defense Ministry's aegis. A fifth brigade will be added to the current four, another 5 000 troops to the country's limit of 28 000.

While many nations in the US-led coalition in Iraq are pulling out their troops, Georgia has raised its commitment. That earned a nod from David Petraeus, the top US commander in Iraq. Georgian media proudly touted his comments, slightly exaggerated, quoting the general as praising Georgian soldiers as some of the most efficient and effective on the ground.

Georgia, of course, gains from its Iraq commitment by showing itself as a contributor to regional security, not just a potential beneficiary of it. Georgian troops are also accumulating excellent experience; their current mission is to plug the smuggling routes along the Wasit province's border with Iran, developing skills easily levied into anti-smuggling operations in the South Caucasus.

But this costs. Georgia's military budget has risen twice this year; official defense spending now amounts to nearly a quarter of the entire budget, and ten percent of GDP. The Defense Ministry's budget is now about GEL 1.3 billion, money mostly dedicated to getting the country's military up to NATO standards.

The rise is incredibly steep, but that's in large part because defense spending four years ago was negligible.

Some opposition politicians attack the defense expenditures as outlandish in proportion to the country's size and economy, but Georgia's neighbors are spending equally feverishly on their militaries.

Azerbaijan, rolling in billions of dollars of oil revenue, raised its military budget to USD 1 billion in 2007, almost four times the amount three years earlier, according to the newspaper Rezonansi.

The Armenian Defense Ministry's public numbers, meanwhile, put their budget at USD 300 million, a 35 percent rise over 2006.

Azerbaijan boasts approximately 70 000 soldiers; Armenia has 50 000. Georgian analysts consider soldiers here to be better trained, though Armenia and Azerbaijan currently have superior military equipment.

While Armenian and Azerbaijani spending is propelling them down a collision course, Georgia's military focus is rightly aimed at achieving the peace and security ensured by membership in the world's most powerful military alliance.

It's understandable to wonder why Georgia must build another military base, instead of dozens of schools and hospitals. Many Georgians are in a state of need, but investing in NATO accession and its accompanying stability is a necessary bow to the needs of the state.
