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Georgia in US-financed arms race for war on Abkhazia, South Ossetia

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■ ■ ■ *Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, is seen as the top takeover-target of Georgia's military plans*

TSKHINVALI (Tiraspol Times) - Despite not being at war with anyone, for the year 2007 the military budget of Georgia is showing the highest growth rate of any country in the world, with much of it being financed openly and directly by its key military partner, the United States.


As a result, fears run high in Tskhinvali these days.

The capital of the small Republic of South Ossetia is increasingly seen as the next target of Georgian military aggression, and many here worry that it is only a matter of time before enemy troops unleash an assault on the city.

Some international analysts agree. Vicken Cheterian, a journalist and political analyst who works for the non-profit governance organization CIMERA, based in Geneva, says that "Georgia's military plans reveal its ambition to reclaim the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia it lost in the wars of the early 1990s."

The journalist, who is a regular contributor to *Le Monde Diplomatique*, points out that since the "rose revolution" of 2003-04, Georgian military spending has effectively been increased by over forty times. The majority of Georgia's arms purchases are financed directly or indirectly from Washington. Salaries for Georgian soldiers have also repeatedly been paid for by American taxpayers.



 Vicken Cheterian, a journalist and political analyst who works for Geneva's Cimera group, warns that Georgia's 40-fold increase in military spending is targeted against Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

" - According to the official goal of joining NATO, Georgia needs to modernize its army, train its soldiers, and build facilities for them," he writes in an article entitled *Georgia's arms race*. "But observers in Tbilisi point that out patterns of spending suggest that Georgia has other projects apart from its NATO ambitions."

U.S. money behind Georgian arms build-up

According to Cheterian, the Georgian defence ministry announced in early May 2007 that it will sharply increase its current defence budget, from 513 to 957 million lari (\$304m to \$567m). This escalation follows an already impressive rise in defense spending since the "Rose revolution." This means that since the arrival to power of Mikheil Saakashvili, defence spending has continued on an upward spiral.

The arms build-up is financed by the United States, he writes in the article which was published by *OpenDemocracy*. The money started flowing in 2002 when an eighteen-month "train and equip" program with a total budget of \$64 million was started to modernize four infantry battalions and one mechanized company.

" - The army also received significant training assistance as well as equipment from the United States military," he notes. "Georgia also received valuable equipment, such as ten UH-1 transportation helicopters from the US government. The value of the US military cooperation with the Georgian armed forces in 2007 is estimated at \$34 million. As a result, some 16,000 troops are now considered trained by the US military."

Most of the military build-up is concentrated against Abkhazia and South Ossetia. A modern, NATO-compatible barracks has just been built in Senaki in western Georgia not far from Abkhazia, and another one is under construction near Gori, a half-hour driving distance from Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia. According to the report, each of these bases will have the capacity to house a brigade, with a troop-strength of 3,000.

Peace in peril

Georgia's military plans have caused alarm among diplomats and others in the international community who prefer a peaceful coexistence of the various ethnic groups who inhabit the Caucasus region.

" - The fact that the two new barracks are close to the conflict-zones of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has led to concerns among both the de-facto governments of those two regions and the international community that seeks a peaceful resolution to these conflicts," explains Vicken Cheterian.

He also writes that there has been a continuous decrease of Russia's military presence parallel to the US-Georgian military cooperation.

" - The Russian military is continuing to empty its former Soviet base in Akhalkalaki, transporting

equipment and ammunition into its base in Gumri, in northern Armenia. Akhalkalaki base is expected to be emptied by the end of the year, while the Russian base in Batumi the next year," he notes. "After this period the Russian presence will be limited to the CIS peacekeeping missions in South Ossetia and Abkhazia."

" - Moscow is increasingly displeased to see the NATO and specifically US military presence becoming permanent in what once was part of its southern Soviet provinces."

In what some see as a *quid pro quo* arrangement, Georgia now uses its military to assist the United States in unpopular wars. In return for this favor, the United States continues to oppose the right of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to independence.

" - The recent announcement in Tbilisi to increase Georgian military participation in Iraq from 850 to 2,000 comes at a time when most European nations have already started withdrawing their troops, and the Bush administration is under political pressure in Washington to come up with its own schedule to decrease troops," explains Cheterian.

He also points out that another 150 Georgian military serve in Kosovo. This is an area where NATO-led troops keep Serbia out, and where the United States State Department is actively pushing for the right of self-determination to override the territorial integrity of a metropolitan state, Serbia.

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