

MILITARY REFORMS AND STABILITY IN THE SOUTHERN CAUCASUS

Joni MELIKIAN

*Expert at the Center for Caucasian Studies and
Middle Eastern Affairs
at the Russian-Armenian (Slavonic) University
(Erevan, Armenia)*

Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, democratization and liberalization processes began in all the post-Soviet countries. These processes were mainly initiated from the outside, but they were also supported by the local power elites.

The Republic of Georgia, which plays one of the most important roles in the region as a political entity, stands out among the South Caucasian countries that are steering a course toward democratization and liberalization. The country has many advantageous prerequisites for this: its transit opportunities, which allow it to create alternative routes that bypass Russia for delivering energy resources and other commodities, as well as its rather contradictory domestic political situation, which could have a certain impact on neigh-

boring countries. Due to its important geopolitical position, Georgia, like other states in the region, can act as a bridge and intermediary between the East and the West. The situation that developed in the region after the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008 also launched certain dualistic processes. They will either help to restore peace and stability, or they could start an arms race and lead to a new and more violent war.

It must be noted that the events going on around Georgia have pushed its domestic issues into background and deprived them of their due attention.

Reform of the Georgian army, establishment of a national security system, and the democratization processes going on in the country are of particular interest.

1. Development of Georgia's Military Capability (1991-2008)

Georgia is still very concerned about how its defeat in the war has affected its economy, domestic policy, and reform of the defense sphere.

Long before the 2008 events and Mikhail Saakashvili's advent to power, the Georgian authorities had been exerting concerted efforts to develop the country's military capability and raise the potential of the army and special services. In order to better understand the processes going on in the republic, let us take a look at how Georgia's armed forces were established.

After the Soviet Union collapsed and Georgia acquired its independence, it began building up its armed forces. The Georgian army, as we know it today, began as the National Guard of Georgia created on 20 December, 1990.¹ On 30 April, 1991, conscription to the National Guard began, and this date is now celebrated as Georgian Armed Forces Day.

The Georgian Ministry of Defense was established in 1992. In the spring of the same year, the 11th brigade (the first brigade of the first corps) was formed under it.² At first, the armed formations were comprised of voluntary contingents. However, over time, particularly after the defeat in the war with Abkhazia and due to the increased integration of the National Guard into the Ministry of Defense structures, they became centralized and institutionalized.

When developing its military capacity, the republic encountered a whole range of problems associated with the Ministry of Defense's insufficient financing. In 2002, it amounted to 36 million lari,³ and in 2003 to 60.9 million lari.⁴ The shortage of monetary funds meant that military and civilian employees of the Ministry of Defense were paid low salaries and servicemen received insufficient monetary allowances, while the Georgian army was technologically backward and had a low level of combat readiness.

But there were also positive changes associated with the increased military aid Western countries gave to Eduard Shevardnadze's government. Georgian servicemen were retrained under the NATO Georgian Train and Equip Program (GTEP) carried out in 2002-2004 and on which approximately 64 million dollars were spent.⁵

In addition to rendering assistance in training and instructing Georgian servicemen, foreign states have also been delivering weapons and munitions to Georgia. For example, the U.S. gave the republic trucks and 10 Bell UH-1H helicopters (four of them to be used as spare parts). Turkey also supplied Georgia with two more helicopters of this kind. Ukraine provided another 10 L-29 training planes and a *Tbilisi* missile boat (206 MR class).

The rise in quality of the Georgian army achieved during Shevardnadze's presidency continued after the Rose Revolution and Mikhail Saakashvili's advent to power. And it seems that he and his team took definite steps to militarize this process. Several conceptual documents were adopted at that time (2005-2007), among which the following can be singled out: the National Security Concept (NSC),⁶ the Threat Assessment Document (TAD),⁷ the National Military Strategy (NMS),⁸ the Strategic Defense Review (SDR),⁹ and Minister's Vision 2008-2011 (MV).¹⁰

Many experts note that these documents show a certain evolution in the views on the targets and tasks of the Georgian armed forces, as well as on the threats from state and non-state actors. Several amendments were made to them as the political situation changed.

We will take a closer look at the keystone document—the National Security Concept of Georgia, in which the state declares its fundamental national values to be the following:

- ensuring territorial integrity;
- maintaining regional stability in the Caucasus and the Black Sea basin;

¹ See: N. Rusadze, "National Guard's Day," *Defense Today*, No. 6, 2007, p. 1.

² See: D. Darchiashvili, "Gruzii: zalozhnitsa oruzhiia," available at [www.abkhaziya.org/books/kavkaz_lsw/georgia.html].

³ Ibidem.

⁴ See: *Strategic Defense Review*, Ministry Defense of Georgia, Tbilisi, 2007, p. 98.

⁵ See: V. Tseluyko, "Reformirovanie gruzinskoi armii pri Saakashvili do Piatidnevnoi voiny 2008 goda," in: *Tanki avgusta*, ed. by M.S. Barabanov, Center of Strategy and Technology Analysis, Moscow, 2009, p. 21.

⁶ [http://www.parliament.ge/files/292_880_927746_concept_en.pdf].

⁷ See: *Strategic Defense Review*, pp. 66-67.

⁸ [<http://www.mod.gov.ge/index.php?page=-10&id=2&lang=3>].

⁹ See: *Strategic Defense Review*.

¹⁰ [<http://www.mod.gov.ge/?1=E&m=3&sm=2>].

- strengthening the state's transit function and energy security.

The Concept specifies the following threats, risks, and challenges to national security:

- infringement of Georgia's territorial integrity, which implied the existence of quasi-state formations not controlled by Tbilisi (Abkhazia and South Ossetia);
- spillover of conflicts from neighboring states, primarily from the Northern Caucasus of Russia;
- military intervention by foreign states (the authors of the concept think that the likelihood of this is low.—*D.M.*) or non-state actors (this likelihood is real.—*D.M.*), etc.

The document notes that integration into the military structures of NATO is the only way to ensure Georgia's national security, while it would also help to resolve many financial problems (defense spending) and provide some protection from outside threats (from Russia).

Between 2004 and 2008, reform of the defense and security structures, as well as the internal affairs departments, has been going on at an accelerated pace. Spending has increased in leaps and bounds; assignments to the army, which amounted to around 30 million dollars a year before Saakashvili came to power, have increased by approximately 30-fold, and by 2008 reached 1 billion dollars (Table 1).¹¹

Approximately half of this amount was spent on reinforcing state security and ensuring internal order. Spending on social needs, education, and public health increased at a much slower rate.¹²

Table 1

**Economic Growth and
State Budget Revenue and
Expenditures**

	Economic Growth	Revenue of Georgia's State Budget, \$ million	Defense Spending, \$ million	Social Security Spending, \$ million
2003	+11.1%	617.3	28.6	160
2004	+5.9%	1,189.1	83.5	250.6
2005	+9.6%	1,799.5	218.8	345.4
2006	+9.4%	2,488.8	405.7	037.7
2007	+12.3%	3,548.5	884	376.5
2008	+2.3%		1,052.4	

Within the framework of democratizing and centralizing its armed forces, Georgia has shifted to establishing a new model that envisages conferring functions of the Ministry of Defense to civilians, as well as employing them in its structures. Georgia's armed force structures were supervised by General Headquarters, whereas later this responsibility was shifted to Joint Headquarters (JH), whereby the functions will be shared by the Ministry of Defense and JH.

¹¹ See: *Georgian Statistical Yearbook*, Tbilisi, 2008, p. 247.

¹² For example, the total spending on defense, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and state security in 2003 amounted to 10.9% of budget expenditures, while in 2007 it amounted to 36.6% of all spending.

The following structures were subordinated to Joint Headquarters: the armed forces command (ground forces, air forces, and naval forces), departments (the National Guard,¹³ logistics and administrative support, education, reconnaissance, and the military police),¹⁴ as well as some other structures.

When carrying out one of the objectives designated by NATO's Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP),¹⁵ the country's leadership unified the supreme military administration system along the same lines as the structures in the NATO Participating states.

The number of servicemen in the Georgian armed forces has increased almost three-fold and reached 36,500. A resolution of the Georgian Parliament of 14 September, 2007 raised the numerical strength of the armed forces from 28,000 to 32,000 servicemen, while a resolution of 15 July, 2008 raised it once more, to almost 37,000. The size of the air defense and naval forces was also increased.

Spending on the military sphere and the purchase of weapons (particularly for artillery), armored vehicles, and air defense means has been rising with each passing year.

As experts from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute note, Georgia increased its import of weapons and military hardware in 2004-2008 almost four-fold compared with the index for 1999-2004, whereby approximately 65% constituted deliveries from Ukraine.¹⁶

In addition to Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (a member of the CSTO) delivered weapons and military hardware to Georgia.

The U.S., several NATO countries (Poland, the Czech Republic, Rumania, and Bulgaria), as well as Turkey and Israel were also having a direct military impact on the Georgian army.

Within the framework of instruction and training programs (GTEP, GSSOP-1, GSOOP-2),¹⁷ for several years, the U.S. has been training and equipping the personnel of four infantry brigades of the Georgian ground forces, as well as some of the republic's special subdivisions and special services.

The following provides evidence of the successful military reforms in Georgia (before the war):

- increase in the quality of the armed forces due to transferring to recruitment on contract;
- reform of the military personnel instruction and training system;
- foreign assistance.

Along with reform of the defense sphere and development of military capability, there was more military rhetoric in the statements of the republic's leaders regarding rapid return of the autonomies to Georgian jurisdiction.

2. Lessons of August 2008. Continuation of the Military Reforms and New Trends (2009-2010)

Georgia drew serious conclusions from the events of August 2008; it is now actively restoring its combat readiness. The armed forces command, which is receiving advice from foreign specialists,

¹³ In keeping with NATO recommendations, the National Guard was formed into an alternative structure to the ground forces and is responsible for training reservists and ensuring mobilization and territorial defense.

¹⁴ See: *Strategic Defense Review*, p. 86.

¹⁵ [<http://www.mod.gov.ge/?l=E&m=4&sm=1>].

¹⁶ See: M. Bromley, P. Haulton, P.D. Wezeman, S.T. Wezeman, "SIPRI Arms Transfer Data, 2008," *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, April 2009, p. 4.

¹⁷ See: Data of the U.S. State Department, available at [www.state.gov/t/pm64766/htm].

is reforming the army keeping in mind the new reality, whereby the hypothetical adversary is no longer Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but Russia.

Before the war, almost all of the above-mentioned conceptual documents were strictly defensive in nature. But now, after the events in August 2008, they, like Georgia's Foreign Policy Strategy (2006-2009), have lost their relevance. The thing is that these documents did not envisage the possibility of waging a full-scale war with such a large state as Russia.

As early as September 2008, the Georgian Ministry of Defense stated that work had begun to amend the country's Military Doctrine and National Security Concept. Deputy Defense Minister Batu Kutelia said that "Georgia intends to synchronize these amendments with the amendments that the NATO countries are making to their concepts, since the new reality is calling for new approaches to the threats coming from Russia."¹⁸

Some experts believe that the war in Georgia mainly had an impact on the following three areas in the country's domestic situation¹⁹:

- (1) national security;
- (2) the political system;
- (3) the economy.

As early as January 2009, a charter on strategic partnership envisaging cooperation in security was signed between the U.S. and Georgia. It was presumed that the U.S. would partially fund modernization of the Georgian army and an increase in the country's defense capabilities.

In 2009, there was a change in the Ministry of Defense leadership in the republic; the new minister, B. Akhalayia, continued the reform of the country's armed forces. For example, by 2009, the numerical strength of the Georgian armed forces amounted to approximately 39,000 servicemen, which was 7,000 more than in 2008.

As for funding, in 2009, the Ministry of Defense was allotted 897 million lari (527 million dollars), and in 2010 this sum was supposed to reach 750 million lari (441 million dollars).²⁰

But the military budget of the Ministry of Defense does not supply the main funds for carrying out military reform; it is largely financed by Western countries. For example, after the Russian-Georgian war, they provided 4.5 billion dollars to restore Georgia's military infrastructure.

Some of the Georgian media have been following the debate on foreign aid in the U.S. congress, and report that in 2009, American military assistance to Georgia amounted to 11.8 million dollars, while in 2010 another 14 million dollars are to be allotted.

When taking a closer look at security and military reform issues, it should be noted that they are set forth in the in-house documents of the Georgian Defense Ministry (Minister's Vision 2009-2010),²¹ and in the near future will be included in the new National Military Strategy and National Security Concept.

The main vectors in the development of the defense ministry, which is to undergo institutional reforms in 2009-2010, are:

- (1) military education;
- (2) the personnel management system;
- (3) the resource management system.

¹⁸ [<http://ru.trend.az/news/politics/foreign/1303672.html>].

¹⁹ See: G. Nodia, "Gruzia v 2008 g: ispytanie na prochnost," in: Collection of articles *Kavkaz 2008*, Yerevan, 2010, pp. 43-44.

²⁰ See: Ministry of Defense of Georgia, available at [<http://www.mod.gov.ge>].

²¹ [<http://www.mod.gov.ge/?1=E&m=3&sm=2>].

Table 2

**Direct U.S. Military Aid to Georgia
in 2007/2010 Fiscal Year
(\$ million)²²**

Fiscal Year	2007	2008	2009	2010 (requested)
International military financing	9.7	9	11	16
International military training and instructional financing	1.16	0.761	1.15	2
Other programs (antiterrorist. etc.)	5.15	3.21	2.2	n/a
Total	16.01	12.982	14.2	More than 18

Another result of the war was disbandment of the navy (or, to be more precise, what was left of it) and its incorporation into the coast guard forces of the Georgian border police. The following types and branches of troops are being formed under the Ministry of Defense:

- (a) ground forces;
- (b) air forces;
- (c) National Guard.

As for transformation of the ground forces, since the fall of 2008, a new artillery brigade called No. 2 (No. 1 remained in the Gori artillery brigade) began being formed on the basis of the Khoni group of the Gori artillery brigade.

During the war, the Georgian air forces lost four helicopters, 3 Mi-24 and 1 Mi-14BT, 1 An-2 airplane, and more.

Georgia still has problems with air defense support, and the situation in this sphere is unlikely to change, since the republic does not have fighter planes, which deprives its air defense system of maneuverability. And even if Georgia is able to acquire a few 4th generation fighter planes, they would not be able to play a significant role because of the low level of pilot training and the quantitative superiority of Russian aviation.

The first measures adopted after the conflict were increasing the number of recruits and transforming the reserve system. The Georgian command understood that in addition to new technology, the army must have a large staff of highly qualified commanders. In 2009, 832 servicemen graduated from the Krstanisi Training Center, while in 2008, only 500-600 recruits were trained there on average at any one time.²³

In the Georgian army, the reserve is formed from the National Guard. After the war, the Georgian reserves acquired a new structure composed of two components: first class reservists (two bri-

²² See: U.S. State Department, available at [<http://www.state.gov>].

²³ See: "The History of Krtsanisi National Training Center," available at [www.mod.gov.ge/?1=E&m=5&sm=12&ssm=1].

gades made up of former servicemen whose contract had ended during the past few years) and territorial defense forces, which are formed from the old active reserve. Their main task is to defend state and military facilities; this kind of reserve relieves the main combat units and independently solves secondary tasks.

Georgia is essentially trying to put its “concept of an armed nation” into practice.²⁴ At the end of 2009, when opening the new building of the National Guard administration, Mikhail Saakashvili said: “We must prepare every citizen of the country, including women, so that they are trained and armed to resist the enemy.”

The Ministry of Defense also defined three main priorities in its further activity:

1. Management and Control

The war showed that there are significant shortcomings both in troop management and in maintaining the troops’ fighting spirit, so particular attention in the reforms has been concentrated on the moral and psychological training of the troops.

2. Air Defense System

The war showed the weakness of the air defense systems; since 2009, Georgia has been reforming them and purchasing new types of weapons and technology.

3. Development of Air Defense Capabilities in the Georgian Armed Forces

Reorganization of armored tank troops has begun; new types of armored vehicles are being purchased (in Ukraine and other countries).

In Lieu of a Conclusion

There can be no doubt that since the Five-Day War of 2008, the situation that has arisen in the Caucasus with respect to regional security is rather ambiguous: on the one hand, the new regional balance of power was supposed to minimize the risk of a new war, but on the other, relations between Moscow and Tbilisi are still tense, which is creating prerequisites for an arms race with all the ensuing negative consequences for regional security.

Reform of Georgia’s defense industry, which began in 2009 and will continue until 2012, is arousing a certain amount of anxiety, since it could bring about a new twist in the arms race and escalation of the conflict in the region (since the August 2008 war, Georgia has not only restored its military might, it has also significantly increased it). At the same time, however, Georgia’s integration into the NATO structures, as a result of this reform, might act as a deterrent preventing the emergence of new or the renewal of old hostilities in the existing hotbeds of conflict.

²⁴ V. Tseluyko, op. cit., p. 32.