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Georgia's Armed Forces: Army of the All or Army of the Few?

While Georgia's politicians believe that reforming the country's armed forces is essential, they remain divided over what roles civilians should play in national defense. Today, Eugene Kogan outlines the issues surrounding Tbilisi's military reforms and what Russia thinks about them.

By Eugene Kogan for ISN

The Case for Reform

Tbilisi started making the case for smaller professional armed forces before the 2008 conflict with Russia. In 2007, the Strategic Defense Review (SDR) envisaged a GAF consisting of 26,000 personnel. And rather than stalling the drive for a smaller military, the 2008 war added further impetus to calls for a reduction in troop numbers. By 2009, the GAF consisted of approximately 37,000 troops. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies' (IISS) *Military Balance*, this figure had declined to approximately 33,000 by 2011.

Alasania also believes that the current size of the GAF is ill-suited and ill-prepared to respond to modern security challenges. Even though the GAF has about 7000 well-trained personnel with operational experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, the rest of the military are poorly trained and educated. In order to overcome these shortfalls, Alasania said in a recent interview with *RIA Novosti* that Georgia needs "a very small but highly mobile army that will be able to stand up to new threats" such as terrorism and extremism.

Taken at face value, it may also seem that the Georgia's declining defense budget justifies the decision to move to a fully professional volunteer force. In 2010, Tbilisi spent approximately \$450 million on defense. The following year, spending fell to approximately \$398 million, before experiencing a slight increase in 2012. Accordingly, the Ministry of Defense, like other government departments, has to live within its means; a situation that is unlikely to change in the coming years as demands grow for extra funds to support the civilian economy.

In with the New?

On 29 January 2013, President Mikhail Saakashvili gave his tacit support for Alasania's proposals. The Georgian President nevertheless remains sceptical about the merit of moving towards a fully professional armed force. Saakashvili instead argues that "in general, society should not be completely separated from the armed forces...every citizen of Georgia, no matter who their parents

might be...should be involved with the military...at least for six or nine months or longer; every Georgian citizen should know how to handle a firearm.” He went on to add that “the existing system should be changed, but we should in no way create a system wherein a Georgian will live without having any involvement with the army; it would be a huge mistake and I think we will not make this mistake.”

To help ensure that Tbilisi does not make such a mistake, the reform of the GAF also envisages a role for reservists and volunteers. A Land Forces Reserve (LFR) is set to be formed to support regular personnel. It is expected that the LFR will consist of compulsory reserve personnel (although volunteers may also be included) tasked to provide assistance to the GAF and, if needed, to replace them in combat operations. The Territorial Defence Reserve, composed entirely of volunteers, is expected to be placed in charge of civil protection during wartime.

Indeed, a ‘pilot’ version of the voluntary component of Georgia’s armed forces is already under way. According to the Deputy Secretary of Georgia’s National Security Council, by 2012 13,000 volunteer reservists (out of an envisaged 100,000) had already been recruited. The new recruits have so far accounted for less than 1% of Georgia’s defense budget, or approximately \$3.5 million.

Trouble Ahead?

It remains to be seen whether the resources allocated to the reservists will be money well spent. Indeed, the final size and shape of Georgia’s professional armed forces also remains subject to speculation. What seems more certain is that the transition to professionalism is likely to be expensive. Unlike conscripts, professional soldiers expect to be paid. Consequently, Tbilisi may be forced to offer a minimum wage of approximately \$480 per month to personnel. In addition, the government will also have to take into account the needs of the servicemen’s families. This will mean the building of kindergartens and schools and as well as improving housing facilities.

Arguably of greater concern – at least over the medium to long term – is how Tbilisi’s military reforms will be received by Moscow. Alasania regularly emphasizes that the GAF has no intention of undertaking offensive operations to regain the lost territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Yet, despite such proclamations the Defense Minister nevertheless considers the main threat to Georgia coming from Russian military bases in the disputed territories. This ambiguity over the potential for conflict with Russian military forces situated in the Southern Military District might be an error in judgement, just as it was prior to the outbreak of the August 2008 war.

Indeed, it is safe to assume that Russia is watching its southern neighbor’s military reforms with great interest. Moscow understands that recent experience gained by units in Afghanistan has helped to turn elements of the GAF into a far more robust outfit. It also seems plausible that Russia will be aware that defending Georgian territory against numerically and technologically superior armed forces is not a task for a “small and highly mobile army”. This, in turn, raises questions as to whether the development of a ‘People’s Army’ supported by the Land Forces Reserve and Territorial Defence Reserve is best suited for Georgia’s security environment.

If the answer to the above question is ‘no’, then perhaps the current mixed model of the military should be maintained, while at the same time the number of professional military personnel should be gradually increased. However, every option or scenario needs to be carefully evaluated by Tbilisi before reforms are enacted. Without this, the rush to proceed with Alasania’s vision may have negative consequences for the GAF in the long run. Accordingly, discrepancies between the role of the military and population in the defense of Georgia need to be addressed and reconsidered if Tbilisi’s reforms are going to have the desired effect on the country and its neighborhood.

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