Mount Ararat, Armenia.

AP/ Wide World Photos (Misha Japaridze)

# Military Engagement in the South Caucasus

*By* JAMES E. DETEMPLE

The importance of the South Caucasus to European security is growing. Recent trips by Lord Robertson to the region underscore NATO resolve to expand security under the Partnership for Peace (PFP) program. Moreover, the three South Caucasus states—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—are moving toward a closer relationship with the Alliance. These developments bode well for future regional stability.

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## Far Countries

Strategically located on the southeastern NATO flank, the South Caucasus borders Iran, Russia, and Turkey. Some observers believe that among post-Soviet regions the South Caucasus is second only to the Baltic states in strategic importance to the Alliance because its territory is contiguous with member nation Turkey and is a natural extension of Europe. It also forms a strategic corridor linking Southern Europe with Central Asia that could be used as a conduit for Caspian energy resources, which will likely play a significant role in European energy security

U.S. meeting with Azerbaijani and Armenian presidents.

AP/Wide World Photos (Wilfredo Lee)

## Armenia

***Defense Budget:*** $65 million for 2001; the gross domestic product in 2000 was $1.9 billion ($3,703 per capita).

***Manpower:*** With a population of 3,464,000, Armenia has a total of 477,000 men between the ages of 18 and 32. Active military strength is 42,060.

***Armed Forces:*** Armenia has an army of 38,900 troops with 110 main battle tanks and air defense and aviation forces with 3,160 personnel and eight combat aircraft and 12 armed helicopters.

*Source*: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 2001–2002* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2001).

## Azerbaijan

***Defense Budget:*** $119 million for 2000; the gross domestic product in 2000 was $4.8 billion ($2,181 per capita).

***Manpower:*** With a population of 7,752,000, Azerbaijan has a total of 990,000 men between the ages of 18 and 32. Active military strength is 72,100.

***Armed Forces:*** Azerbaijan has an army of 62,000 with 262 main battle tanks; a navy with 2,200 sailors and six patrol and coastal craft; and air and air defense forces with 7,900 personnel and 35 combat aircraft and 15 armed helicopters.

*Source*: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 2001–2002* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2001).

and the global energy market if regional instability is overcome.[1]

Security problems, including ethnic conflicts, humanitarian crises, and regional disintegration, beleaguer the three countries. Georgia has been troubled by internal disputes since gaining independence in 1991. Abkhazia on the Black Sea and South Ossetia on the Russian border tried to secede in the early 1990s. Moscow has been implicated in supporting secessionist movements in both regions. Russian support for the separatists, who achieved de facto independence, was presumably in retaliation for Georgia's refusal to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Georgia finally joined in 1993 after the West repeatedly ignored the pleas of President Eduard Shevardnadze for assistance. Russian forces (supposedly representing CIS) deployed to Abkhazia in 1994, following a Georgia-Abkhazia ceasefire agreement. In addition, Russian troops have been in South Ossetia since 1992. Tensions remain although ceasefires are in effect in both regions.

**Russian military presence in Georgia is a serious challenge to regional stability**

Russian military presence in Georgia is a serious challenge to regional stability. NATO has in fact been seeking the withdrawal of Russian military equipment. The Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, signed in 1990 and amended in 1997 and 1999, established ceilings on conventional weaponry and reduced the allowable size and forward deployment of Soviet, and later Russian, forces. As of December 2000, Russia is in compliance in Georgia, but NATO has also said that it must dismantle its bases there to honor an agreement reached at the November 1999 Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Istanbul summit. Compliance on this point may not be forthcoming. There are four bases in Georgia which the Russians are loath to part with: Akhalkalaki on the southern border with Turkey, Batumi on the Black Sea, Gudauta (Abkhazia), and Vaziani near the capital, Tbilisi. Additionally, Russian peacekeeping forces stationed in Abkhazia continue to strain relations. Dismantling Moscow's bases and withdrawing its forces remain thorny issues.

The Kremlin's influence is also prominent elsewhere in the region. It has a formal security pact with Armenia and supplied the country with $1 billion worth of arms from 1994 to 1997. Additionally, Russian ground forces with 74 main battle tanks, a MiG–29 squadron, and an air defense battery are deployed at a military base on Armenian territory.

## Georgia

***Defense Budget:*** $22 million for 2001; the gross domestic product in 2000 was $4.7 billion ($5,289 per capita).

***Manpower:*** With a population of 4,891,000, Georgia has a total of 590,000 men between the ages of 18 and 32. Active military strength is 16,790. Reserves forces number 250,000.

***Armed Forces:*** Georgia has an army of 8,620 with 90 main battle tanks; a navy of 1,040 sailors with 11 patrol and coastal craft; and an air force with 1,330 personnel with seven combat aircraft and three armed helicopters.

*Source*: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 2001–2002* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2001).

Russian campaigns in Chechnya are another source of instability. Attendant security issues include Moscow's constant allegations that Georgia and Azerbaijan are serving as bases for Chechen rebels. The possibility that Georgia is being used as a transit country for fighters and weapons is remote since Chechens assisted Abkhaz secessionists in their fight for independence against Georgia. Nevertheless, the Kremlin has tried to force Tbilisi into transferring control over the 70-kilometer Chechnya-Georgia border to Russian guards and may also try to pressure Baku into accepting Russian bases on Azerbaijan soil. NATO and the West have expressed grave concern about human rights abuses and the potential spillover of the conflict in the Caucasus. One analyst predicts that the Chechen war will "aggravate existing conflicts and ignite new hot spots throughout the region."[2]

There is little likelihood that the Kremlin will change its policies. Russia includes the South Caucasus in what it regards as its sphere of influence and exerts considerable leverage on the foreign and defense policies and defense of the former Soviet states. Yielding to Russian pressure, President Shevardnadze softened his position on applying for NATO membership. Tbilisi also announced that its internal troops would increase their patrols in the Pankisi Gorge near the border to block infiltration routes of Chechen guerrillas into Russia.

Moscow has also expressed alarm at alleged NATO and U.S. encroachment on former Soviet territory, particularly the oil-rich Caspian basin.

In addition to Russia's role in the region, there are other major issues. Nagorno-Karabakh remains another flashpoint. Azerbaijan and Armenia fought a three-year war over that ethnically Armenian Azeri autonomous region after it proclaimed independence from Azerbaijan in 1991. Seven years after the ceasefire, prospects for resolving the conflict over the disputed territory have improved slightly, with the U.S. administration taking a more active mediating role. Renewed fighting

in the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave, however, would certainly undermine regional stability.

## The Alliance Response

A wide range of South Caucasus security issues, including the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, have been discussed regularly in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), which provides the overall framework for cooperation between NATO and partner nations. The council established an open-ended ad hoc working group on the Caucasus to intensify conflict prevention and crisis management. This subregional group could form the basis for a new security architecture and help to develop a regional stability pact in coordination with the European Union (EU), Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and United Nations.

According to Giorgi Burduli, Georgia's First Deputy Foreign Minister, if the concept for "the stability pact in the Caucasus bears fruit, the role of the EAPC, along with other international organizations, would be substantial in terms of consultation and practical cooperation."[3] He stated further that "regional cooperation in the Caucasus is still weak" and that EAPC should encourage the South Caucasus states to continue using the ad hoc working group, for example, to facilitate negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan to address the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Having an agreement such as the U.S.-Baltic Charter or the EU Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe "would go a long way towards diffusing regional conflicts and anchor these vulnerable states firmly with more powerful countries and international bodies."

**the size and scope of PFP activities have increased significantly**

A regional security system underpinned by NATO and EU would greatly enhance regional stability. According to the Secretary General:

*We continue to place a high priority on the strengthening of our partnership with all members of the Euro-Atlantic community through the EAPC and the Partnership for Peace. We believe that partnership is pivotal to the role of the Alliance in promoting security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic region and contributes to the enhancement of the Alliance's capabilities in crisis management. We therefore welcome discussions underway in the EAPC on its possible role in conflict prevention and crisis management, and in developments to promote regional cooperation in Southeast Europe as well as in the Caucasus and Central Asia.*[4]

Azerbaijani soldiers.

AP/Wide World Photos (Shakh Aivazov)

NATO focuses on the South Caucasus as it relates to European interests. Objectives include fostering regional security and stability through peacetime military engagement; ensuring access to Caspian basin energy resources; combating nontraditional threats such as international terrorism, drug trafficking, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; and containing Russian resurgence at the expense of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia and Azerbaijan. NATO is also alarmed by the increased militarization on the southern borders of CIS. Furthermore, the West is concerned by the rapidly developing security relationship between Moscow and Tehran. Iran is already Russia's third largest customer for weapons and military training after China and India. The Russian-Iranian initiative is clearly intended to block NATO influence in the area and monopolize energy corridors from the Caspian region to Europe.

Interest in the South Caucasus is illustrated by the visits of the Secretary General to Georgia in September 2000 and Armenia and Azerbaijan in January 2001. Outlining the general approach guiding NATO engagement, Lord Robertson emphasized that European security is "inseparably linked to that of other countries." In Tbilisi he told a conference on Regional Cooperation and Partnership with NATO that "the more secure our neighbors are the more secure we are. . . . European security first of all depends on how well our neighbors are protected."[5]

## Enlarging Engagement

PFP constitutes the chief NATO tool for deepening military cooperation in the South Caucasus. Members such as Turkey and the United States also provide military assistance on a bilateral basis that complements the partnership. After joining, each partner nation in consultation with NATO developed a two-year individual partnership plan which sets specific interoperability objectives and the basis for expanded cooperation with the Alliance.

The size and scope of PFP activities in the South Caucasus have increased significantly. Azerbaijan and Georgia joined at the program's inception in 1994 and have become two of its most active constituents, using the partnership as a means to bring their armed forces closer to NATO standards. A Georgian infantry platoon currently operates with a Turkish battalion as part of the peacekeeping force in Kosovo (KFOR). Georgia's KFOR role is a source of great national pride and demonstrates the country's ability to work smoothly with allied peacekeeping forces. Azerbaijan also has an infantry platoon operating with Turkey's peacekeeping battalion.

Azerbaijan's and Georgia's 2000–2001 Individual Partnership Plans focused on activities ranging from peacekeeping and disaster planning to

Training near Tbilisi, Georgia.

AP/Wide World Photos (Shakh Aivazov)

English-language training and military exercises. Georgia hosted several activities and joint exercises in 2001, including its first multilateral PFP exercise, Cooperative Partner, maritime and amphibious field training designed to increase stability in the Black Sea region and build confidence among the littoral states, including Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey, and Ukraine. Troops from five NATO countries—France, Germany, Italy, Turkey, and the United States—in addition to six partner nations—Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Sweden, and Ukraine—were invited to participate. Forces included 4,000 military personnel, 40 warships, two submarines, 12 fighters, and two military transport aircraft. The Alliance also committed portions of the Standing Naval Force Mediterranean, composed of destroyers and frigates. Amphibious forces from several countries, including 100 Georgian marines from the battalion in Poti, practiced amphibious techniques in support of peacekeeping and humanitarian relief.

Azerbaijan is already scheduled to host its first PFP exercise, a peacekeeping staff drill designed to practice operating a multinational brigade headquarters according to established NATO command and control procedures, to include coordinating airlift, medical evacuation, and search and rescue for a peace support operation. Among its themes are learning to work with relief organizations, improving coordination of aerial delivery of humanitarian relief supplies, and utilizing aviation assets such as transport helicopters. NATO members—France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Spain, Turkey, and the United States—and partner nations—Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Kyrgyzstan, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, Slovakia, and Switzerland—will take part in a computer-aided simulation. Azerbaijan also conducts regional courses in civil-military cooperation at its military academy in Baku. Uniformed personnel from all the South Caucasus states attend NATO courses and seminars in crisis management and peacekeeping in addition to other exchange programs.

Azerbaijan and Georgia are undergoing force restructuring and reorganization with technical assistance from NATO, Turkey, and the United States. Turkey recently modernized the Marneuli air base in southern Georgia for $1.5 million. U.S. military cooperation is designed to help the armed forces develop the capabilities necessary to preserve territorial integrity and

become more self-sufficient in matters such as border security and military reorganization. U.S. European Command recently conducted an assessment of Georgia's military and made recommendations for restructuring, including the creation of a rapid reaction force of up to three light brigades. Ukraine's 11th Mechanized Infantry Brigade has been designated as the core unit to respond to crises, including natural disasters and civil emergencies, and is among the formations spearheading the transformation of Georgian land forces.

Additionally, Special Operations Forces recently conducted training on demining in all three countries. This humanitarian effort was intended to help the three states deal with countless land mines remaining from the Armenia-Azerbaijan and Abkhazia-Georgia disputes. The U.S.-sponsored activity brought together soldiers from Armenia and Azerbaijan for the first time since they fought over the Nagorno-Karabakh territory.

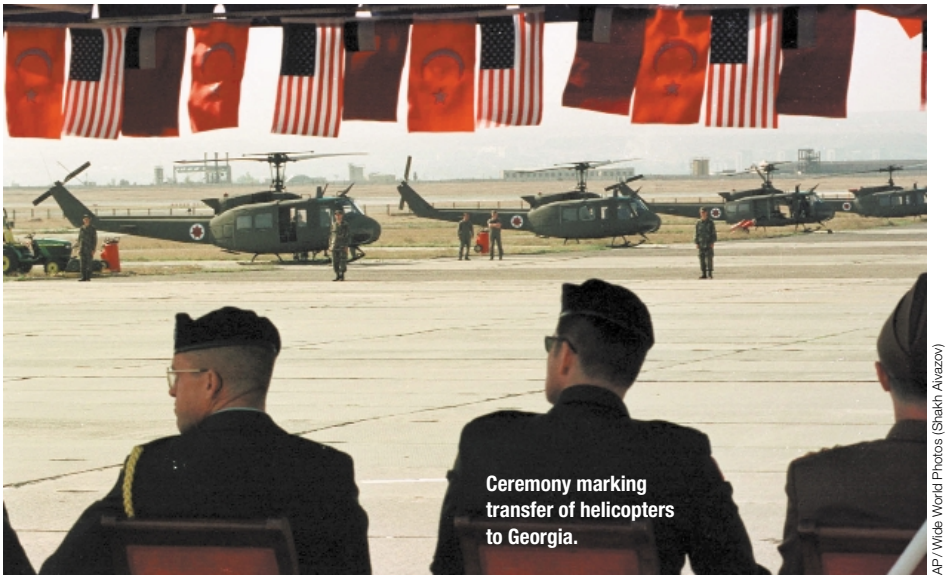
Armenia has considered upgrading its biennial Individual Partnership Plan and increasing cooperation with NATO within the PFP framework. Admiral Guido Venturoni, Chairman of the Military Committee, visited Armenia in March to discuss Alliance efforts to expand military cooperation and met with President Robert Kocharian, Prime Minister Andranik Margarian, Defense Minister Serge Sarkisian, and Lieutenant General Mikael Harutiunian, Armed Forces Chief of Staff. Armenia also expressed interest in obtaining NATO assistance in forming a U.N. peacekeeping battalion. The visit produced an informal agreement on creating an Armenian peacekeeping unit with NATO assistance within the PFP framework. Moreover, the country was enthusiastic about officer training in the West, English-language training for military personnel, and other opportunities PFP can offer.

Along with peacekeeping, Armenia seeks to learn how to cope better with natural disasters, particularly earthquakes. One project combines the information systems of its institutes for seismological analysis with those of Greece, Italy, and the United Kingdom.

Armenian troops guarding parliament.

AP/Wide World Photos (Misha Japaridze)

Indeed, disaster preparedness is an area for expanding cooperation, especially since the South Caucasus is prone to earthquakes and floods. Local states are keen to increase interaction with NATO in disaster planning. In late September 2000, NATO and Ukraine conducted a disaster relief exercise in the Trans-Carpathian region of western Ukraine. The exercise actually built on the experience gained by Ukraine and EADRCC from flooding in the Trans-Carpathian region in 1998. The scenario featured a command post exercise followed by a field training drill. The first phase tested the procedures used by the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Center (EADRCC) at NATO Headquarters and national



Ceremony marking transfer of helicopters to Georgia.

AP/Wide World Photos (Shakh Aivazov)

disaster response coordination centers to meet a request for international assistance from Ukraine. The second phase focused on disaster response teams from 11 countries operating as part of the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Unit, marking the first time the unit was exercised as a whole. Other activities included search and rescue and provisions for life support, medical care, water purification, and cleaning contaminated rivers.

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## Patterns for the Future

Three trends have emerged in recent years. First, NATO military engagement within the PFP framework increasingly aims to improve interoperability between partner and allied forces. This is particularly important since the Alliance will play an extended role in future multinational peace support operations such as the ongoing mission in Bosnia. Crisis management and peacekeeping have joined collective security as a staple of the Alliance mission. Integrating partner nations into NATO-led peace support operations is a political and military necessity that remains critical to efforts to enhance security and stability on Europe's periphery.

Second, PFP is the primary means for non-NATO nations to move closer to the Alliance. Accordingly, partners now play a more active role in determining the size and scope of their participation. Active involvement in PFP remains essential to joining the Alliance, providing a way of transforming defense establishments based on Western models and developing interoperability with NATO forces.

Third, the South Caucasus and Central Asian states are keenly interested in greater cooperation with NATO. In 1999, Georgia joined the Planning and Review Process, a special program for defense planning cooperation within PFP intended to help allied and partner militaries prepare for combined operations. Azerbaijan has also joined and has expressed strong interest in developing a Membership Action Plan in preparation for the possibility (albeit remote) of applying for NATO membership. On the other hand, Azerbaijan and Georgia, which are contiguous and border Turkey, may be considered serious candidates for accession at some stage as they will play a pivotal role in allied and U.S. efforts to enhance regional security on Europe's periphery.

NATO engagement within the PFP framework should enable the South Caucasus to make steady progress toward interoperability with allied forces and regional security and stability. Additionally, the Alliance has outlined a coherent strategy for engagement based on Individual Partnership Plans, the Planning and Review Process, and Membership Action Plans. These efforts will help improve the performance and capabilities of future coalition partners. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] Anna Lindh, "Resolving a Frozen Conflict: Neither Russia nor the West Should Try to Impose a Settlement on the Southern Caucasus," *Financial Times*, February 20, 2001.

[2] Igor Rotar, "Chechen Spark-Caucasian Powder Keg," *Perspective*, vol. 10, no. 2 (November/December 1999).

[3] Speech by Giorgi Burduli, First Deputy Foreign Minister of Georgia, at the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council Foreign Ministers Meeting, May 25, 2000.

[4] Communiqué, NATO Defense Ministerial Meeting in Brussels, December 5, 2000.

[5] Speech by Lord George Robertson, "Caucasus Today: Perspectives of Regional Cooperation and Partnership with NATO," Tbilisi, September 26, 2000.