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Guest Editorial

Thoughts on Russia and Georgia

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(AINA) -- Under the terms of a Department of State contract, I was hired to be an advisor to the Republic of Georgia's Ministry of Defense and General Staff. I arrived on the very day of the "Rose Revolution" which launched the current president, Mikheil Saakashvili into the international arena. My job was to assist the Georgians in their reform effort -- the extant military organizations were based on the Soviet model and they wanted to chance into a modern, Western model.

I was to advise the Ministry staff on planning, programming and budgeting. Similarly, I worked with the General Staff -- their G-5 -- on military force structure and stationing. There was a parallel effort going on which was to thoroughly reorganize the ground forces from the individual soldier level up. Part of this work (but not within the scope of the contract) was the reshaping of the entire national security apparatus of the former soviet republic. For example, the Georgian Ministry of Interior maintained its own fleet of trucks, tanks and artillery (for internal security purposes). These units were either integrated into the regular armed forces or reshaped into something like our Department of Homeland Security. These are the people who suffered the initial casualties during this invasion -- Georgian cops with patrol cars vs. IEDs planted by separatists supported by Russian tanks and artillery.

We formed their new units based on a US light infantry battalion model -- but with fewer crew served weapons (machine guns and mortars,) very little logistical support, armored vehicles, artillery or air defense weaponry. This was done specifically to assuage Russian angst that Georgia might take military action in the provinces stolen from them by Russian interference in the early 1990s.

These "break-away" provinces have been organically part of the Georgian nation since before Roman Times. There was a real King Midas and a real "Golden Fleece" from this area. Many of the Greek Fables attributed to Aesop are in fact folk tales of Georgian origin. Abkhazia (on the Black Sea) and South Ossetia (in Central Georgia) were Georgian before the 1st Russ refugee ever settled in what is now Moscow.

The Soviet Union regularly forcibly moved ethnic peoples far from their normal homelands as a control measure. Ossetians are people from the North Caucasus -- the part of Georgian they live in is called Samachablo by the Georgians but was denominated South Ossetia by the Soviets during the USSR period in the 1920.

South Ossetians normally take vacations in August to visit their relatives in the North Caucasus. There is only one way to get there -- the Roki tunnel -- otherwise they have to go far to the east or west (a series of mountain passes into Chechnya or out to the Black Sea). This year, the normal vacation period for the Ossetians became a call of ethnic cleansing by the Russians against the Georgians. The Georgian President responded by taking journalists to the conflict zone and showing them that there was no mobilization of Georgian forces -- only Russian propaganda. No matter -- the Russians generated an incident and the Georgians were forced to respond.

Much -- if not all -- of what you're hearing from the Russians in the news is classic disinformation. There are open source reports that the Russians are claiming that some of the bodies found in Georgia have had US or NATO insignia on them and that we are engaging in genocide. Russia clearly has been planning this for quite some time -- they've had their railroad troops repair the tracks on both sides of the Russian/Georgian border; they hacked all the official Georgian governmental outlets and many of the private businesses (anybody with an .ru e-mail and an IP address in Georgia); their navy has landed troops far from the conflict zone; heavy trucks and tank transporters have been moving south through the mountain passes from the North Caucasus.

Most disturbing is the timing of all this -- President Putin launched this during the Olympic Games as he was meeting with President Bush -- clearly a direct & personal insult.

This war is very much about oil -- there is a pipeline from Azerbaijan through Georgia into Turkey. This is a private business venture managed by British Petroleum. Clearly, if the Russians can cut this then Europe will continue to be dependent on them for oil and gas.

Russian railroad troops refurbishing the double-tracked, electrified heavy, main line from Russia into Georgia along the Black Sea is part of a larger plan to provide munitions and "material" to Iran. Russia and Armenia have already signed an agreement for a Russian "private" company to take over the Armenian railroad. There are rail connections in Armenia into Iran. Open source reports indicate a three-way agreement is being developed to fix the Armenian-Iranian rail connections. A cowed (and crippled) Georgia would be forced to allow the transshipment of whatever cargo the Russians wanted to send through its client (Armenia) to its ultimate customer (Iran.)

What is going on in Georgia now is of a piece with Ukraine in the 20's, Finland in the 30's, the Berlin Airlift in the '40's, Hungary in the '50's, Czechoslovakia in the 60's, Afghanistan in the 70's, etc.

It is noteworthy to say the population of Georgia is less than that of metropolitan Boston and yet they have more soldiers in OIF than anybody else save the Brits and South Koreans.

John Stinson is a West Point graduate and retired Special Forces Lieutenant Colonel who spent one year in Georgia and two years in Iraq.

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