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Georgia's Army and the Country's Evolving Strategic Position

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Georgia's military is increasingly facing various challenges emanating from the changing balance of power in the South Caucasus. So far there are adequate responses which involve initiation of an air-defence systems upgrade as well as that of the overall strategic thinking which was attuned to the pre-Second Karabakh War period.

Over the past year Georgia's strategic position in the region has dramatically changed. To be sure, the geopolitical circumstances upon which Tbilisi operated before were not encouraging either, but they nevertheless provided significantly greater room for manoeuvring. In contrast, what the country has witnessed since the Second Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan limits its far larger array of foreign and military policy tools.

The most striking change came in the regional military balance of power. Georgia's two neighbours, Azerbaijan and Turkey, showed a surprisingly high level of political cooperation and military coordination prior to and during the military operations in and around Nagorno-Karabakh region. Though separated geographically (except for a tiny land bridge to the Nakhchivan exclave) the two states managed to work in concert.

Turkey's and Israel's provision of and Azerbaijan's use of military drones introduced a new feature of the modern warfare when Armenia's mostly Russian produced weaponry proved to be of little effectiveness. The successful use of mountainous warfare by the Azerbaijani side against entrenched Armenian forces also showed a high level of preparedness and the overall advancement of Azerbaijani armed forces enjoyed the strategic advice of their much-experienced Turkish allies.

Taking stock of these developments, the Georgian armed forces now face a changed reality in the South Caucasus. Radical improvements of the Georgian army tactically and technologically are likely to follow to adjust to geopolitical and military changes. No less important are adjustments to the country's military concept to the new realities – primarily to the fact of yet another Russian military presence in the region. In case of a military conflict Georgian forces would face Russian forces not only in the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions, but potentially from the southern direction too, though the official name of the Russian soldiers stationed in Karabakh is that of peacekeepers.

Successful use of drones by Azerbaijan showed the need to buy and perhaps in the longer term even develop domestic production of similar capabilities by Tbilisi. In fact, some unconfirmed reports claim that the government is already looking at this by developing plans to establish local development. What was also uncomfortable for Tbilisi was that the major supplier of combat drones to Azerbaijan was Georgia's another neighbours, Turkey. This underlined Tbilisi's insecurities – in case of a regional military conflict the country is surrounded by militarily and technologically far superior armies from all sides. Even Armenia is spending far larger financial resources than Georgia. This reality is perhaps behind the trend of the past several years when Georgia's military budget is growing on yearly basis, though it still remains minuscule.

As argued above, the growth of Russian power along Georgia's borders is of grave concern for Tbilisi. But in the longer term the robust Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance could also serve as an uncomfortable fact as the war changed the very fabric of Georgia's geopolitical position vis-à-vis Ankara and Baku. Armenia's growing dependence on Russia is yet another irritant underlining Georgia's military insecurity. Previously Tbilisi enjoyed the benefits of Armenia's seclusion and Baku and Ankara needed Tbilisi. In the aftermath of the 2020 war, however, much has changed: Georgia from now on is unlikely to serve as the only transit for Azerbaijan and Turkey, which potentially is fraught with relative diminution of Georgia's bargaining clout.

The most likely change will take place in the country's air defence system which proved to be the weakest spot in Georgia's defence. The 2008 war with Russia highlighted the holes in this area when Russia with its obvious aerial superiority easily targeted and destroyed Georgia's defence capabilities. This lack of air defence was the single most important deficiency which led to the defeat of 2008.

It took almost a decade to initiate a meaningful improvement. In 2015, Georgia signed a contract for the approval of the French radar station Thales Raytheon Systems. Later in Paris, a second contract was signed for the lease of a rocket launcher. An agreement was also reached with the French company MBDA – leading European developer and manufacturer of missile systems – Tbilisi spent 238 million GEL ($96 million). Georgia also first demonstrated a French radar station equipped with the Ground Master (RLS GM403) on the Renault Truck Defence chassis. RLS GM403 is capable of controlling airspace at distances up to 470 km and at altitudes of up to 30 km.

But there are concerns too. Air-defences are costly and considering the economic troubles the country experiences both because of internal deficiencies and the pandemic, it is unclear if Georgia is successful in setting up a full-fledged, capable state-of-the-art air-defence system. Air-defences are a constantly evolving sector of the military. It needs constant renewal, which brings us to the question of how effective those technologies bought in the recent years be against, for instance, the Russian military. And the example of the Russian military here is pertinent not only for Georgia's fateful experience of 2008, but also for what happened in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020. Numerous reports filtered through the media on alleged ineffectiveness of Russian air-defences in Armenia's service. Considering how staggering h Yerevan's military expenses have been throughout the years, the country still failed to obtain a necessary weaponry to defend against Azerbaijan's Israel- and Turkey-provided modern drones.

The Second Karabakh War highlighted the need to address the issue in a timely manner. Even before the conflict broke out, in September 2020 Georgia signed an agreement with representatives from the Israeli Ministry of Defence affiliated Rafael Advanced Defence Systems (RADS). This is of particular interest to Russia since Georgia's RADS-based air-defences could include the experience of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) which successfully tested its assets against Russian MiG-29, Su-30SM and Su-35S jets deployed in Syria.

Beyond the Rafael contracts, Georgian Ministry of Defence also discussed the possibility of the Israeli company Elbit Systems upgrading Georgia's Air Force, namely, equipping aircraft with modern electronic systems.

All in all, these measures are directed less towards possible military confrontation with a neighbouring country or the pursuit of military solution of Georgia's territorial conflicts in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region, but more so towards adjustment and compatibility with NATO standards. Supplying Georgia with state-of-the-art weaponry is a delicate issue. It relates to the hesitancy to provoke Russia into military action. The Israeli alternative is an understandable solution for Georgia's modest military appetite. Relegating the supplier role to Israel also works well for the West. But here too, Georgia should be cautious in not overreaching as it could invite Russia's prompt political and even military response as in 2008. Navigating in between the Israeli-Russian ties and tensions between the West and Russia is what in the longer run could provide Tbilisi with some breathing space and precious time to build an effective defence system.

Finances will remain an issue because of internal economic failures and negative global trends. But there is also an urgent need to address the air-defence deficiency, which will be likely pursued in the coming years regardless of which party will be at the helm of the government. Georgia's slow adjustment to the changes brought about as a result of the Second Karabakh War will continue.

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