

Georgia: The mouse that roared

Written by Eric Walberg
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The line in the sand has been drawn on Georgia and NATO. Beware pushing the limits of Russia's patience too far, worries Eric Walberg

8/5/8 -- While Georgians see themselves as part of Europe, "the whole history of Georgia is of Georgian kings writing to Western kings for help, or for understanding. And sometimes not even getting a response," said its thoroughly Westernised president, Mikheil Saakashvili, in a recent interview. "Not just being an isolated, faraway country, but part of something bigger."

With a population of 4.7 million, this beautiful land, noted for its dozen or so hot-blooded independent-minded peoples, is surrounded by at best indifferent neighbours Armenia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and of course Russia.

Its fiery 40-year-old president does not disappoint, with his penchant for thumbing his nose at Russia and lavishly admiring US President George W Bush.

In his short first term (he called early elections last year and won a disputed second term, though his popularity even officially dropped from 97 to 52 per cent), he combined scorning bluster at Russia with oily praise for Bush and now presidential hopeful Senator John McCain, who even brought him a bullet-proof vest, all the time loudly demanding membership in NATO.

This may just look like pre-election posturing, with less than a month to go before the country's parliamentary elections, but there's just too much at stake to think so. It's as if he is determined to prove to the world that NATO is indeed primarily an alliance to confront Russia.

In fact, Georgia cannot by any stretch of the imagination become a legitimate member of the "Atlantic" alliance, which according to its charter is a North American-European alliance. Georgia, unlike Turkey, has not even a fraction of its territory in Europe. So Saakashvili seems determined to show the world that not only is NATO primarily an anti-Russian alliance, but it is not even a European one. But then we know what often comes out of the mouth of babes. Petulant children are always revealing embarrassing truths which adults try to keep hidden.

While Europe's "kings" demurred at Saakashvili's noisy whining at the last NATO meeting in April in Bucharest, the matter is far from settled. Not a day goes by now without claims of the Russians shooting down Georgian spy planes and counter-claims of Georgian troop build-up

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on the border of the breakaway Georgian province of Abkhazia.

This is all according to plan for Saakashvili. Georgia was the main topic at an emergency 30 April NATO meeting in Brussels, following Russia's deployment of extra peacekeeping troops and setting up of observation border posts in Abkhazia, in turn in response to Georgia's deployment of 1,500 troops in the mountainous Upper Kodori valley -- a small but strategic enclave inside the separatist territory. It was "possible to conclude that Georgia is preparing a base for a military operation against Abkhazia", the Russian Foreign Ministry reported. At the NATO meeting, it was announced that "NATO ambassadors" would be coming to Tbilisi soon as a show of support for this non-European country that just happens to be a vital alternative energy transit route to Russia. Negotiations on Georgia's eventual membership to NATO are intended to begin in December.

Under a key Soviet-era arms pact, Moscow should notify NATO nations of any troop movements, as it has continued to do despite freezing the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty last December. Despite the claims and denials, the UN mission monitoring Georgia and Abkhazia, UNOMIG, said on 21 April that its monitors "did not observe anything to substantiate reports of a build-up of forces on either side."

Whatever the details, the Russians are clearly reinforcing the current status quo in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where citizens have Russian citizenship for the asking, while the Georgians -- at least the president -- are determined to reincorporate the rebel territories. Russian President Vladimir Putin recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia, another breakaway region of Georgia, as legal entities this month, prompting Tbilisi to accuse Russia of "de facto annexation". Georgia denied that it was planning to recapture Abkhazia, but then Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has said many times that Russia is duty-bound to protect Russian-speakers in the breakaway regions and would use military force if Georgia attacked either Abkhazia or South Ossetia.

Abkhazia's Foreign Ministry said last week that the threat of a Georgian attack was real. "We have a very distinct feeling that Georgia is preparing something," Maxim Gunjia, Abkhazia's vice foreign minister said. "We expect an attack from Georgia at any time."

Russia's government recently upgraded its trade relations with the breakaway republics, while diplomatic relations with Georgia have chilled and Georgian wines been banned, much to Saakashvili's chagrin. Or is this precisely what he wants? To provoke the giant and turn

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Georgian against Russian, while alternately charming and shouting "wolf!" to his new Western friends, drawing them into Georgia's long, if obscure, history of swashbuckling warfare? As if to make the point, on 29 April, Georgia confirmed that it plans to block Moscow's accession to the World Trade Organisation.

Saakashvili attempted to smooth things over with the Abkhaz and South Ossetian people during a televised address on 29 April in which he offered to make the vice-president of Georgia an Abkhazian, and described Russia as an "outrageous and irresponsible force" attempting to "involve us in confrontation. The more we speak about peace, the more this third force speaks about war. It is the force that leaves you no right of choice and speaks on your behalf with us and with the rest of the world that needs confrontation."

The leaders of both unrecognised republics rejected Saakashvili's offer of peace and friendship out of hand. De facto Abkhaz President Sergei Bagapsh said, "the existence of Abkhazia and Georgia in a unified state is impossible," while his South Ossetian counterpart, Eduard Kokoity, accused Georgia of conducting a policy of genocide against the Ossetians and stressed that, "the Ossetian people have made their choice in favour of an independent state."

There is little likelihood that this brash youngster will revert to realpolitik in the near future. He seems to thrive on controversy. He has even invited the Israeli army to train Georgian commandos. His rash and impetuous style is increasingly alienating not only Russians, but his own Georgians as well. Last November, opposition protests prompted him to impose a state of emergency that included a blackout on all non-state media.

Is NATO the key to a return to glory for this beleaguered nation, or a ticket to further misery and insecurity? As history has shown Georgians time and again, Europe -- let alone the US -- is far away. Saakashvili, seemingly looking for a doting parent across the Atlantic, might pause to ponder an Arabic proverb: "A close neighbour is better than a far distant mother." He would also be wise to take a lesson from his country's often tragic history: while Georgia flourished briefly as an empire in the 13th century, it has fared best when it made peace with its neighbours and made the best use of its rich endowments, both natural and human. This is precisely what it did during its Soviet period, when its film directors, composers, artists, writers, and athletes -- not to mention politicians -- wowed the world, when its mountains yielded world class wines and served as a playground for countless tourists.

While Eastern Europe and the Baltics managed to jump into NATO's embrace with little protest

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from Russia, the attempt to suck Ukraine and Georgia into what is clearly a US military alliance intended to police the world will not be tolerated by Russia. Instead of making peace with its increasingly robust neighbour, Saakashvili is doing everything to provoke it into full scale confrontation, with the intention of drawing the EU and US in to save its bacon.

So far only a few sane voices have been heard from Europe, notably German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier. None from the US. Whether NATO dresses up the need to leave Ukraine and Georgia out as a sensible compromise with Russia or lets this squeaky mouse draw it further into a very dangerous confrontation is increasingly an issue that concerns the entire world. It is time for sensible NATO members and non-NATO countries to speak out before shots are fired at more than unmanned drones.

But even if an acceptable comedown is achieved, the damage to NATO's peace-loving image will have been done. Saakashvili, by pushing the boundaries of this bogus alliance into the realm of the surreal, may just be the catalyst for its well-earned demise.

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/896/in2.htm>