

# US troops deployed to former Soviet republic of Georgia

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1 March 2002

Two US Air Force planes brought forty American military personnel to Tbilisi, capital of the former Soviet republic of Georgia, on February 21, marking the first deployment of US combat forces in the Caucasus region, adjacent to one of the world's largest oilfields.

According to a report by the security intelligence service STRATFOR.com, "[T]he personnel include Special Forces troops, who specialize in counterterrorism operations, and Air Force logistics personnel normally based at Incirlik, Turkey." STRATFOR cited an account of the arrival in the Russian newspaper *Nezavisimoe Voennoye Obozrenie*.

The deployment was confirmed at press briefings by Pentagon officials February 26. They said the 40 soldiers were members of an evaluation team sent from the military's European Command to assess Georgia's military needs. All but a handful have now returned to their base in Stuttgart, Germany, but they will be replaced by up to 200 Special Operations troops who will provide training and tactical direction to Georgian forces.

As in the Philippines, the Pentagon maintains that the US troops will "advise" local forces on tactics and weapons to use against supposed terrorists, in this case Chechen and Islamic militants who operate in the Pankisi Gorge, near the Georgian border with Chechnya. They may also operate Predator drones that can fire missiles by remote control.

One Pentagon official told the *Washington Post*, "We have a clear connection between Chechens and al Qaeda. They clearly fall under the potential targets of the global war on terrorism."

The Pentagon has already provided Georgia with ten UH-1H Huey helicopters, and Georgian personnel are being trained in how to operate and maintain the aircraft, which would be used for attacks on guerrilla positions.

American and Russian officials have charged that Georgia has lost effective control of the Pankisi Gorge,

where thousands of Chechens have fled from the brutal Russian military occupation of Chechnya. They both assert that Georgian weakness has allowed hundreds of Chechen militants and dozens of fighters loyal to Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden to use the region as a sanctuary and logistics base.

Where the two regimes come into conflict is over who will take advantage of the alleged presence of Islamic terrorists as a pretext for intervention. The Americans offer US special forces and their high-tech weaponry, while the Russians have sought Georgian permission for Russian forces to invade the Pankisi Gorge, effectively bringing the Chechen war to Georgian soil.

Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze has repeatedly rebuffed the Russian demands, instead opting for an approach to the Bush administration that has now borne fruit.

In an interview with a Georgian weekly magazine February 11, US charge d'affaires and acting ambassador Philip Remler issued the first US endorsement of Russian complaints about Pankisi Gorge. He claimed that dozens of former Afghan mujahadin had fled that country and joined the Chechen guerrillas in Georgia, and announced that the US would work with the Georgian defense ministry to train anti-terrorist forces.

A US think tank, the Central Asia Caucasus Institute, issued a report the same week suggesting that the collapse of the Taliban regime could produce a spillover into Georgia. The institute wrote, "If illegal groups dealing with international terrorism, narcotics trade and other forms of activities that shun government control are forced to leave Afghanistan and look for new countries with a weak government, Georgia may be an option."

Russian officials have reacted sharply to the prospect of a unilateral US intervention into Georgia, which they regard as part of their sphere of influence. Georgia would be the fifth former Soviet republic to play host to US

military advisers, warplanes or other combat forces, following Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, all of which have provided significant assistance to the war in Afghanistan.

Russian officials have masked their opposition with suggestions that a joint US-Russian attack on Chechen and Islamic guerrillas should be mounted. On February 20, Reuters quoted “a senior US official” rejecting any joint operations with Russian forces against the Chechen militants. The official denied a report carried by the Russian news agency Itar-Tass to the effect that the US had agreed to the Russian proposal, and said any operation in the Pankisi Gorge would be an exclusively US-Georgian operation, with no Russian involvement.

Asked about the Russian press report at a news briefing, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said there had been no shift in US policy.

Russian national security officials have continued to press for Georgian cooperation in operations in the Pankisi Gorge. On February 21, the same day that the first US military advisers arrived, Nikolai Patrushev, chief of the Russian intelligence service FSB, traveled to Georgia for talks with Shevardnadze and Georgian State Security Minister Valery Khaburdzaniya.

According to the analysis by STRATFOR, the deployment of American troops in Georgia is “a big strategic victory” for the United States. The publication cited increased US pressure on the entire western and southern border of Russia, the possible role of Georgia as a base for US attacks on Iraq, the proximity of that location to the pipelines planned for bringing Caspian oil and gas to the world market, and the increased influence of Washington over Georgia’s neighbors, especially oil-rich Azerbaijan.

“The US military presence will help ensure that a majority of oil and gas from the Caspian basin will go westward,” STRATFOR wrote, “bypassing the United States’ geopolitical rivals, Russia and China.”

There are other strategic implications, especially the diminution of Russian power in the region and the expanded role of Turkey, a key US ally.

American forces are likely to be stationed at the Vaziani airbase near Tbilisi, which Russia abandoned last year. The Russian general staff has reportedly issued orders to close down the Georgian headquarters of the Group of Russian Forces in Transcaucasus, which controls all Russian military operations south of the Caucasus Mountains. The liquidation of this military headquarters would leave the Russian forces now stationed in Armenia

dangerously isolated, separated by Georgian territory from their logistical support structure in Russia itself.

Turkish influence in the region has been steadily increasing, both in Azerbaijan, which is predominantly Turkish-speaking, and in Georgia, where Turkey has now surpassed Russia as the largest trading partner.

According to a report from Istanbul last month, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey have finalized work on a tripartite agreement on regional security. The document reportedly includes provisions on combating terrorism and organized crime as well as protecting a number of oil pipelines, especially the US-backed Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan project, which would bring Caspian oil through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey to the Mediterranean.

The agreement is said to include Turkish use of air bases in Azerbaijan, which would mark the first deployment of Turkish troops in the Caucasus since World War I. According to Russian press reports, Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit discussed the bases in Azerbaijan during a recent visit to Washington. Turkish personnel are also being sent to Georgia to work on modernizing that country’s military infrastructure.

The tripartite pact pointedly does not include Armenia, which has common borders with all three countries. Armenian officials have expressed concern that the new agreement on military cooperation may encourage Azerbaijan to revive its claims to the disputed Armenian-controlled enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, site of a bloody military conflict in the early 1990s.



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