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## THE ROLE AND PLACE OF GEORGIA IN THE RUSSIAN MILITARY CALCULUS

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There is a saying that appetite comes with eating. In other words, Georgia is indeed a sweet cake that Putin and his administration are interested to take care of. As a result, they pay the upmost attention to Georgia and are not ready to let others take care of the country. How Georgian political and military elites see the Russian encirclement of Georgia is of no importance to the Russian military, since the latter know full well that Georgian politicians can only complain about the Russian encirclement, yet will do nothing to hinder it. Furthermore, the Russian military see the encirclement of Georgia as a one-way street, in that steadily encroaching upon Georgian territory will reduce the country's independence and sovereignty and will slowly move it back into Russias fold. In order to understand the role and place of Georgia within the Russian military calculus we need to look at the bigger picture. For instance, the Russian military continues to view Georgia as a pivotal transit country for oil and gas pipelines and a newly-built rail link from Azerbaijan to Turkey (Baku-Tbilisi-Kars). Furthermore, Georgia is primarily responsible for the missing rail link between Abkhazia, the breakaway region of Georgia, and Armenia, still the staunch ally of Russia. Georgia is also a major transport route and an energy transit country from Russia to Armenia. As a result, the Russian military views Georgia as part of the Russian sphere of influence where all the necessary links come together, a kind of regional strategic hub. In addition, they see in Georgia a potential Russian pressure point on Turkey, a NATO member state.

Putin and his administration view Turkey with mild suspicion, despite President Erdogans repeated reassurances that Russia is a friendly country and an important economic partner of Turkey. They say that: For too long Turkey was and still remains a NATO member state and, as a result, cannot be fully trusted, assurances or not. Furthermore, the Russian military bases in and has joint task forces with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the breakaway regions of Georgia, as well as the Russian military bases in Armenia and the soon-to-be-established Russian-Armenian Military Joint Task Force (MJTF) set to encircle Georgia. Finally, since Georgia lacks serious air and naval capabilities, Russia maintains its air and naval dominance over Georgia in the Black Sea and thus puts Georgia in a tight spot.

It is currently hard to say whether or not Russia is interested in revitalizing the defunct Transcaucasian Military District (TMD) that existed during the Soviet era by including Azerbaijan in it. However, such a possibility cannot be dismissed entirely, although the author has no evidence to support his assumption. If such evidence exists, it would remain highly classified by the Russian military and is unlikely to be disclosed. Nevertheless, the aforementioned Russian actions highlight

the very important place and role of Georgia in the Russian military calculus. The authors point is further reinforced by the Nezavisimaya Gazeta military expert Lieutenant-General Yuri Netkachev. According to Netkachev, "Georgia striving to join NATO poses a threat to the Russian friendly countries (Abkhazia and South Ossetia). This is an important factor in Russia strengthening its positions in the region". Netkachev's claim that Georgians aim to join NATO poses a threat to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the breakaway regions of Georgia, is indeed ridiculous. However, at the same time, it shows that Georgia is viewed by the Russian military as an important link to what is happening in the South Caucasus and justification for Russian strengthening its presence in the region. Keeping Georgian political and military elites guessing what may happen in the future remains the Russian mid-to long-term policy for the South Caucasus region in general and for Georgia in particular. Furthermore, the Russian guessing game versus Georgia also targets Georgia's partners, such as the EU, NATO and the US who are currently distracted from the region by their domestic challenges. That the rhetoric of Georgia's partners has only partly manifested in deeds encourages Russia in its pursuit of keeping Georgia in its sphere of influence. To reinforce the authors point of view about the Russian medium-term policy and Russian pursuit of Georgia, Stephen Blank writes that, coupled with the integrated air-defense system (IADS) and anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) networks that Russia is building in and around Syria and the Black Sea, Russia is constructing an elaborate network of air and naval defenses. As a result, the constructed network places the entire Caucasus beyond the easy reach of NATO and Western air or military power. As Blank continues, in other words, as Moscow moves to maneuver Turkey, as well as Georgia and Azerbaijan, into its orbit through combined economic, ethnic, military and political pressures, it is also ensuring that these countries will be placed behind an air-defense umbrella. This could allow the Russian Army and/or Navy to advance into them if necessary and to do so with impunity, since Western forces would be deterred by the likely high rate of casualties they would incur. Indeed, when this network is completed, Moscow need not invade but only threaten to undermine the sovereignty or integrity of these countries, or their pro-Western affiliations and economic-political ties.

A variety of soft security tools available to Russia, such as propaganda and/or disinformation campaigns combined with cyber security attacks plus imposed economic sanctions, would be ruthlessly used by Moscow to bring Georgia under Russia's heel, even before Moscow decides to move in and finish the business called independent Georgia. The Russian military option towards Georgia cannot and should not be ruled out. Such a warmongering scenario may sound too cold-blooded and sober minded to the liberal-minded political elites in the West, but that is how Russia's political elites and military think and operate in the 21st century, authors comment. The authors assertion will be dismissed outright by the Russian officials, but this should be expected. Furthermore, Blank states that the consequences of this Russian strategic operation are quite clear. If NATO cannot effectively defend the Caucasus or connect to it, Georgia's NATO option becomes meaningless. Since NATO remains unwilling to accept Georgia as a member, the [Georgian] application [for membership] will become an empty ritual, a cheque that cannot and will not be cashed. The result of Georgia not becoming a NATO member state but rather remaining a NATO partner turns Georgia into easy prey for belligerent Russia, a point reiterated below.

Despite NATO's presence in Georgia, which Russia tends to exaggerate intentionally, Russia does not consider this presence as a threat that would jeopardize its plans to keep Georgia in its sphere of influence. Putin and his administration know full well that NATO is not in a position to assist NATO partner Georgia if Russia decides one day in the future to bring recalcitrant Georgia back into its fold. Let us remember that Putin's plans to invade Georgia in August 2008 were prepared

in 2006 and put into motion two years later. Even if Putin and his administration will dismiss the authors assertion outright, such plans exist and are likely to be carried out if and when Putin and his administration see the right moment to execute them. Let us remember the famous quote expect the unexpected or be prepared for any [Russian] eventuality that Russian officials would deny strenuously, since they live in their own created world: the world of denial.

In conclusion, Georgia continues to play an important role in overall Russian strategic goals in and around the South Caucasus and the Black Sea region. Georgia is a link to Armenia and Azerbaijan as well as a pressure point on Turkey, whom Russia is interested in keeping at bay, decoupling from the NATO Alliance and exerting a degree of control over. Georgia is also a rail link between Abkhazia, the breakaway region of Georgia, and Armenia, that Russia is very much interested in re-establishing.

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