

Georgia's mutiny mystery

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Did this week's events signal increasing Russian aggression, Georgian paranoia, or both?

By Lincoln A. Mitchell

According to Georgian Defense Minister David Sikharulidze, the news this week that the Georgian government had thwarted a presumably Russian-backed mutiny on May 5 was evidence that Russia had engaged in an attempt at "disrupting NATO exercises and overturning the [Georgian] authorities militarily." For opposition leaders such as Zviad Dzidziguri, the whole affair was "yet another stage show" concocted by President Mikheil Saakashvili's government to discredit the country's domestic opposition. Information is still becoming available, but determining the truth is likely to be difficult because both sides have enough evidence to present a fairly convincing case. This is, after all, the Caucasus, where political intrigue is the regional sport.

It's true that Russia is clearly uncomfortable with this week's NATO exercises in Georgia and, for that matter, anything that might suggest that Georgia will soon become part of the transatlantic alliance. Although Georgia's chances of getting into NATO in the near future are significantly less than what some in Tbilisi, and Washington, would like, it's certainly not out of the question that Russia would jump at the chance to play a disruptive and destructive role in Georgia.

Nonetheless, Russia's very real aggressive tendencies coexist with the Georgian government's habit of suggesting that any opposition to the government is either Russian-funded or Russian-backed. In fairness to Saakashvili, this is something of a reflex for Georgian leaders: It was not too long ago that Saakashvili himself was being accused of being a Russian operative by the government of then President Eduard Shevardnadze.

The attempted mutiny comes at a sensitive time in Georgian politics. Demonstrators have been on the streets of Tbilisi calling for Saakashvili's resignation for almost a month. Although it is unlikely the president will resign, there is significant frustration throughout the country over the decreasing democratic space in Saakashvili's Georgia, as the electronic media is dominated by the government and critics of the government are inevitably accused of being disloyal. Then there is the president's conduct during Georgia's brief and disastrous war with Russia last August. The defeat was viewed by many both inside and outside Georgia as caused by the president's poor judgment and impulsive decision making.

While it is possible that Russian leaders saw this week as a moment to decisively oust Saakashvili, whom they despise, it is also plausible that the Georgian government will seek to leverage this thwarted mutiny into another attempt to discredit the political opposition and link it to Russia.

Whatever actually happened, Washington would be wise to keep a close eye on developments in Georgia. Last year when Russia and Georgia went to war, the United States almost became involved in the conflict and was seen by many in the former Soviet Union as having encouraged Georgia to provoke a fight. Further conflict between these two countries will be felt throughout the former Soviet Union, where many countries still fear renewed Russian power. Moreover, Georgia's domestic political situation is far from resolved. Saakashvili's regime is very polarizing, and the recent mutiny attempt -- whether it was a Russian-inspired coup attempt, an indigenous Georgian military revolt, or a story embellished for short-term political gain by the Georgian government -- does not augur well for Georgia's stability.

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