

Georgia increases its contingent in Afghanistan

On 9 June in Brussels, Georgia's defence minister Bacho Akhalaia confirmed his country's willingness to increase its military contingent in Afghanistan; it will now be the largest of the non-NATO forces. The decision demonstrates Tbilisi's great determination to maintain and develop its cooperation with the US and NATO.

The decision to significantly increase the Georgian contingent was announced after a meeting between President Mikheil Saakashvili and the US Vice President Joe Biden in Rome on 1 June. At a meeting of NATO defence ministers (NAC) with the head of the Alliance and ISAF commander General David Petraeus, the decision was repeated and clarified. Georgia, whose armed forces number 37,000 soldiers, plans to strengthen its current contingent of 925 personnel with another battalion of 725 soldiers as of 2012. This means that the Georgian forces will be larger in number than the largest non-NATO contingent, that of 1550 Australian soldiers. Afghanistan is the only country in which Georgia has a military presence. The Georgian army has operated in Afghanistan since 2004 as part of the OEF/ISAF mission, and currently serves under US command, mainly in Helmand province. The contingent has lost eight personnel so far.

Tbilisi's decision to make a spectacular increase in its contingent in Afghanistan (as well as maintaining its two thousand-strong presence in Iraq until 2008) is an attempt to draw attention to Georgia's 'credibility as an ally [i.e. a potential member of the Alliance]', as well as its determination to develop its political and military cooperation with the US and NATO, which was significantly weakened as a result of the Russian-Georgian war in 2008. <ks>