



Army Games and Russian Soft Power

OE Watch Commentary: As expected, Russia proved victorious during the 6th annual International Army Games, which were held from 23 August to 5 September. Russia has won every year since its inception in 2015. While concerns over COVID-19 kept some invitees at home, 32 countries (to include newcomers Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Palestine among others) competed in 30 different events designed to test military proficiency. Besides the training value and a forum to show off its weapon systems, the Army Games also provide Kremlin and defense officials with the opportunity to exercise Russian soft power. In the accompanying excerpt from the mostly independent *Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obezreniye*, the author describes how the games provided Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu with the prospect of calming tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and also perhaps increase weapon sales.

The article begins by describing how Shoigu met with both the Azeri President and Defense Minister during one of the games and used the opportunity to inform them that “Russia is not interested in escalating tensions in the Trans Caucasus region, and its [Russia’s] actions are not directed against third countries in this region.” The author goes on to suggest that President Ilham Aliyev and General of the Army Sergei Shoigu “most likely spoke about the situation in the Tovuz region on the border of Armenia and Azerbaijan.” Tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia have increased over the past few months, and because Armenia is a member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), with Russia having military forces stationed in Armenia, Shoigu stressed that “all our actions have never been directed and are not directed now against Azerbaijan, our neighbor and our partner.”

The article then reviews the major military equipment Azerbaijan has purchased from Russia over the past decade (\$5 billion worth), to include “T-90S tanks, BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicles, BTR-82A armored personnel carriers, artillery systems, including Msta-S self-propelled howitzers, Smerch multiple launch rocket systems and TOS heavy flamethrower systems,” as well as helicopters, air defense systems and small arms. It also points out that Azeri defense officials “announced the interest of the republic’s air force in the Russian MiG-35 and Su-35 aircraft.” The author posits that this proposed purchase “may be a response to the purchase of 12 Su-30SM fighters by Armenia.”

The author concludes by asserting that “Moscow is pursuing a fairly balanced policy in the region,” whereby it ensures that “Armenia and Azerbaijan maintain a balance of power, [thus] preventing either side from going over to large-scale hostilities.” The International Army Games provide Russian defense officials with unique opportunities to both prevent, and perhaps profit from, conflict among participants and their customers.” **End OE Watch Commentary (Finch)**



Defense Minister Shoigu speaking at the closing ceremony of the 2020 Army Games, 5 Sep.

Source: https://xn--80ahclcogc6ci4h.xn--90anlfbebar6i.xn--p1ai/images/upload/2019/zakritie_armygames_05.09.2020_1200_3.jpg CCA 4.0 Intl

“... the competition also has a political component...”

Source: Dmitry Litovkin, “Сергей Шойгу нашел новый способ предотвращать конфликты,” [Sergei Shoigu found a new way to prevent conflicts} *Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obezreniye*, 28 August 2020. https://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2020-08-28/1_1106_games.html

The visit of the Russian Defense Minister to Azerbaijan, formally connected with the need to launch one of the stages of the International Army Games “Sea Cup,” showed that the military are capable of solving complex problems not only on the battlefield, but also at the negotiating table. In one day, Sergei Shoigu met with the country’s President Ilham Aliyev, and also held a meeting with the head of the military department Zakir Hasanov....

Army games are an invention of Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu.... However, the competition also has a political component. Its essence is the ability of the heads of the military departments to meet directly face to face and discuss current problems. At a meeting with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, the head of the Russian military department said that Russia is not interested in escalating tensions in the Trans Caucasus and its actions are not directed against third countries in this region....

The topic of the ARMY-2020 exhibition held in Kubinka outside Moscow was casually touched upon. Sergei Shoigu noted that there are a lot of novelties in its exposition that could interest the Azerbaijani military....

It is clear that in the first case, already in the closed part of the meeting, President Ilham Aliyev and General of the Army Sergei Shoigu most likely spoke about the situation in the Tovuz region on the border of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

“We know and watched with concern the events that took place on the border with Armenia.... I want to say right away: all our actions have never been directed and are not directed now against Azerbaijan, our neighbor and our partner. Russia is not interested in escalating tensions in the Trans Caucasus,” Sergei Shoigu assured Ilham Aliyev.

...As for the ARMY 2020 exhibition, everything is completely transparent here: Baku is among the largest buyers of Russian weapons in the region. Over the past decade, Azerbaijan has purchased Russian arms and military equipment for about \$ 5 billion... Currently, the country has already received modern T-90S tanks, BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicles, BTR-82A armored personnel carriers, artillery systems, including Msta-S self-propelled howitzers, Smerch multiple launch rocket systems and TOS heavy flamethrower systems....

...Earlier, the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan announced the interest of the republic’s air force in the Russian MiG-35 and Su-35 aircraft.... The purchase of these aircraft may be a response to the purchase of 12 Su-30SM fighters by Armenia. The word “answer” can be considered a key word. Moscow is pursuing a fairly balanced policy in the region. The supply of modern equipment to Armenia and Azerbaijan allows maintaining a balance of power, preventing either side from going over to large-scale hostilities....