

Azerbaijani minister's exit suggests defence re-set

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Newly appointed Defence Minister Zakir Hasanov has sacked the two deputy ministers he inherited from his predecessor, it was reported on October 24. Both the removal of Safar Abiyev and the naming of the commander of the country's Internal Troops as his replacement as defence minister represent a significant shift in policy, with suggestions of a possible launch of serious defence reform and a new anti-corruption drive within the Azerbaijani armed forces. The move may also herald a more forceful use of the military to ensure internal domestic order and stability.

What next

Re-elected President Ilham Aliyev may be preparing to launch a defence reform aimed at greatly increasing the offensive capabilities of his armed forces and rooting out the entrenched corruption that has been centred in the Defence Ministry for years. The appointment of the Internal Troops commander may also suggest a new expanded role for the armed forces in internal security, continuing a recent trend of hard-line measures to deter domestic opposition and thwart signs of potential unrest and instability within Azerbaijan. The move may heighten concerns in Armenia, possibly triggering some Armenian response.

Analysis

Only three days after his inauguration to a third term, Aliyev unveiled his new cabinet on October 22. Amid the few changes, the dismissal of his long-serving defence minister was a surprise.

For many analysts monitoring the Azerbaijani military, the position of defence minister was widely regarded as an important indicator of the state of defence reform. More specifically, the position and tenure of Abiyev was seen as a critical factor in assessing both Azerbaijan's military capabilities and its commitment to serious defence reform.

After several years of a significant surge in defence spending and the more recent procurement of modern offensive weapons (see CAUCASUS: Tensions will stay high until Baku election - August 26, 2013), the Azerbaijani armed forces could finally be about to match rhetorical threats of renewed war with the Armenians over Karabakh with real capability. However, Abiyev's tenure was tainted by a string of allegations of corruption within the Defence Ministry and a number of questionable deals in the procurement process, raising questions over whether the extra funds allocated to defence were well spent (see AZERBAIJAN: Frontline weakness raises Karabakh risks - September 14, 2011).

Regime loyalist

Yet, throughout much of Abiyev's 18-year tenure, his main role has been to protect the ruling Aliyev family, making the armed forces more of a 'palace guard' than a real fighting force. This explains the enduring power of this minister, long seen primarily as devoted to the Aliyev family (both to former President Heydar Aliyev and his son and successor, Ilham) and committed to protecting their personal and political power, and only secondarily as the country's defence minister.

Impact

- For the army, the long-serving defence minister's departure could usher in a new period of reform, aimed at building a stronger force.
- The broader impact may be significant, in terms of restoring military cooperation with Turkey.
- It may also heighten concerns of an escalation in tensions with Armenia over disputed Nagorno-Karabakh.

**Removal of Abiyev from
Defence Ministry was
unexpected**

Such a role was natural within the context of Azerbaijani politics, and conforms to one of the most important lessons given to Ilham by his father in preparation for assuming the mantle of leadership in late 2003: that the armed forces were the only credible potential threat to the government. In this context, the military was long kept under-funded and rather weak, in order to deter any Turkish-style model of playing a role in domestic politics. Additionally, with the precedent of the attempted military coup d'etat by renegade Colonel Surat Huseinov in June 1993, such precautions seemed warranted.

Regime saw military as
potential threat

Fresh opportunity for reform

There are two possible scenarios to explain the motivation for dismissing Aliyev now:

Internal manoeuvring

First, the dismissal may suggest a change in the internal balance of power among competing factions around the government. In that context, the president may be seeking to manage competing power centres within the system by juggling emerging elites, using the chance to reward one camp with the corruption-tainted Defence Ministry.

Reinvigorated reform

A second scenario that is equally plausible may be that the move stems from a decision to embark on real defence reform. After years of mismatch between the rhetoric of threatening war over Nagorno-Karabakh and the actual state of readiness of the Azerbaijani army, Aliyev may see the need to make his threats more credible by forging a new fighting capability that was previously missing.

After years of increased defence spending, now standing at an impressive 3.7 billion dollars for 2013, the need for serious reform is logical. Moreover, after winning his third term as president, Aliyev may also feel more confident and comfortable with building a real fighting force, especially as such defence reform would be managed by a new minister with a record of demonstrable and proven loyalty. As much as the outgoing minister was loyal and subservient, he was, nevertheless, an inherited loyalist, who had served the current president's father.

Aliyev may now be more
confident about reforming
military

Domestic implications

Yet there is also another domestic consideration to the appointment. The promotion of 54-year-old Hasanov, a career soldier who was stationed in East Germany as a Soviet officer, is also a reward for his recent role in using the Interior Troops to deter domestic unrest, especially crucial in the wake of a series of demonstrations in the provinces earlier this year (see AZERBAIJAN: Popular discontents pose no threat -- yet - February 27, 2013). Moreover, his elevation may also usher in a period of even more forceful crackdown on domestic dissent, with the military assuming a greater role in internal security. After a number of high-profile and heavy-handed moves to arrest and intimidate the opposition (see AZERBAIJAN: Protests may go on after Aliyev's victory - October 2, 2013), this trend may continue.

Outlook

Whatever the explanation, the dismissal and replacement of the defence minister is a significant development, with some shift in the role of the Azerbaijani armed forces to be expected. It may signal a new drive against graft, but the success of that looks doubtful, given the entrenchment of corruption within the Azerbaijani military.