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Strengthen Bilateral Defense Cooperation with Georgia

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U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel will soon meet with his Georgian counterpart, Irakli Alasania. Georgia has been a steadfast ally of the United States. Thousands of Georgian troops have served alongside U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. Hundreds have been wounded, and dozens have been killed.

This meeting offers an opportunity for Secretary Hagel to thank Georgia for its contribution in Afghanistan, congratulate Georgia on its military reforms, and lay the groundwork for deeper bilateral cooperation.

Georgia: One of America's Best Allies in Europe

Few countries in the Euro-Atlantic region express as much enthusiasm for NATO as Georgia—even though it is not yet inside NATO. Georgia also welcomes the presence of U.S. forces. Currently, a small detachment of U.S. Marines located at the Krtanisi National Training Center is preparing Georgian soldiers for combat operations in Afghanistan. In addition, elements of the U.S. Marine Corps Black Sea Rotational Force and U.S. National Guard and reserve units visit Georgia for joint training missions.

After the Russian invasion in 2008 and the subsequent Russian occupation of 20 percent of Georgia's

territory, Georgia has decided to transform its military and participate in numerous overseas military operations to gain vital combat experience.

At the time of the 2008 Russian invasion, Georgia had the second-most troops in Iraq after the U.S. At the height of the war in Afghanistan, Georgia had almost 2,000 soldiers there. Today, it has 1,600 troops in Helmand province, making it the largest per capita troop-contributing nation.

In 2012, when many NATO countries, such as France, were rushing for the door in Afghanistan, Georgia committed more troops to the mission. Today, while many NATO countries refuse to say how many troops (if any) they will leave in Afghanistan for the post-combat training mission, Georgia has already publicly committed up to 750 soldiers. Moreover, Georgians will be contributing to the NATO Response Force starting in 2015.

Georgia's Strategic Location

Located in the southern Caucasus, Georgia sits at a crucial geographical and cultural crossroads and has proven to be strategically important for military and economic reasons for centuries. Today, Georgia's strategic location is also important to the U.S.

In 2010, the deteriorating security situation in Pakistan forced the U.S. and NATO to look toward Russia for its transit requirements for Afghanistan. As a result of Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, Moscow might not be willing to maintain these transit routes.

Georgia has offered its territory, infrastructure, and logistic capabilities for the transit of NATO forces and cargo for Afghanistan. Georgia is modernizing key airports and port facilities in the country,

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and a major railway project is due to be completed later this year linking Azerbaijan to Turkey via Georgia. The transit route through Georgia provides one of the shortest and potentially most cost-effective routes and offers huge potential for NATO's use as the Afghan withdrawal begins to increase. Most important, it would reduce NATO's dependence on Russia for moving military resources in and out of Afghanistan.

An Example for NATO

Georgia has recently implemented major defense reforms to ensure it can operate effectively alongside NATO. A recent poll in Georgia ranked the armed forces the second-most trusted institution in the country, behind only the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Many of the reforms taking place today within the Georgian Ministry of Defense were started under the previous government and built on and expanded under the leadership of Alasania. These reforms include greater civilian control and transparency, improvement and investment in key defense capabilities, and more support to service personnel and their families.

NATO has praised Georgia's progress in defense transformation many times. The alliance called on Georgia to share successful reforms with other nations, and the U.S. expressed support for Georgia to share its experiences and best practices in defense transformation with other partner nations.

Looking West

At the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008, Georgia was promised eventual membership. Georgia has come a long way toward NATO membership. However, some NATO members are concerned that Georgia's entry into NATO would trigger a war with Russia over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Georgian officials say that they are happy to accept a NATO membership arrangement or compromise that excludes the two occupied territories from NATO's Article 5 security guarantee until the matter is resolved peacefully with the Russians. To demonstrate its commitment, Georgia made a "non-use of force" pledge regarding the occupied territories, which Russia has failed to do.

Significant attention is paid to the political situation in Georgia. Georgia's recent elections, in which the ruling United National Movement Party lost its majority to the Georgian Dream Coalition, rep-

resented a coming of age for Georgia as a democracy. The elections were peaceful, and international observers gave it high marks for openness and fairness. After being defeated at the ballot box, former Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili graciously conceded defeat, which led to the first peaceful political transition in recent memory in Georgia.

However, the law must apply equally to those who are governed and those who govern. There have been multiple investigations launched against former government officials and ministers, and the U.S. State Department has expressed "concerns about political retribution, particularly when legal and judicial institutions are still fragile." As the next NATO summit in Wales approaches, this issue will be on the minds of its members.

Keeping Georgia on the Right Track

The Georgians have proven themselves to be capable in combat. They also are undertaking a defense transformation program that is an example to all of NATO. In addition to thanking the Georgians for their contribution and sacrifice in Afghanistan, Secretary Hagel should also:

- **Help the Georgians defend themselves.** Every country has the inherent right to self-defense. The U.S. should sell defensive anti-tank and anti-aircraft weaponry to Georgia. The Georgians live under a constant Russian threat. So long as the weapons are defensive in nature, there is no reason not to provide them to the Georgian military.
- **Push for a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP).** Georgia has made good progress with defense and military reforms. Georgia should be rewarded for its defense transformation during the Wales summit by receiving a MAP.
- **Continue with U.S.–Georgia military training.** The U.S. should safeguard funding for training exercises in Georgia from defense cuts. The U.S. should work to maintain this close relationship when the mission in Afghanistan winds down. U.S.–Georgia military training also places U.S. forces in the heart of a region with deep U.S. interests.
- **Consider using Georgia as a transit route for Afghanistan.** As relations with Russia continue to deteriorate and Pakistan remains unstable,

the U.S. and NATO will need to find other supply routes for Afghanistan. The transit route through Georgia could offer one of the shortest and most cost-effective routes.

Do Not Waste an Opportunity

Georgia is a staunch ally of the U.S. and NATO. It is located in a dangerous neighborhood, and Russia poses a constant threat. Nevertheless, Georgia has been able to implement serious defense reforms and

continues to participate in security operations at a rate much higher than many NATO members. The Georgian defense minister's upcoming visit provides the U.S. a perfect opportunity to strengthen the bilateral relationship with Tbilisi.

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