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The Perfect Opportunity to Advance the U.S.–Georgian Defense Relationship

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U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter will meet with his Georgian counterpart, Tinatin Khidasheli, the week of August 17. Having recently been appointed as defense minister (and the first female defense minister in Georgia’s history), this will be Khidasheli’s first meeting at the Pentagon in her new role. Georgia has been a steadfast ally of the United States, and Khidasheli has been a leading voice inside Georgia for closer ties with the U.S. and NATO. Thousands of Georgian troops have served alongside U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. Dozens have been wounded. In Afghanistan alone, 30 Georgian soldiers have made the ultimate sacrifice.

This meeting offers an opportunity for Secretary Carter to thank Georgia for its continued 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 a member of the Alliance. The NATO–Georgian relationship has never been closer. During the last NATO summit, the Alliance endorsed the NATO–Georgia Package that will

strengthen Georgia’s defense and interoperability capabilities with the Alliance. Georgia is contributing a light infantry company to the NATO Response Force in 2015 and 2016. The NATO–Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Center is opening later this year at the Vaziani training area located outside the capital city Tbilisi. Last month, Georgia hosted NATO’s Agile Spirit command post exercise, which included 250 soldiers from Bulgaria, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania.

Georgia also welcomes the regular presence of U.S. forces. In May, more than 600 American and Georgian soldiers completed exercise Noble Partner, the largest U.S.–Georgian military training exercise to date. Elements of the U.S. Marine Corps Black Sea Rotational Force and U.S. National Guard and reserve units often visit Georgia for joint training missions.

At the time of the 2008 Russian invasion, Georgia had the second-largest number of troops in Iraq after the U.S. In 2012, when many NATO countries, such as France, were rushing for the door in Afghanistan, Georgia added more troops to the mission. Today, Georgia has 885 troops in Afghanistan, making it the second-largest troop contributor to the NATO training mission after the U.S.

Russia’s Continued Aggression

Russia views the South Caucasus as being in its natural sphere of influence and stands ready to exert its influence in the region by force if necessary. In August 2008, Russia invaded Georgia, coming as close as 15 miles to Tbilisi. Seven years later, several thousand Russian troops continue to occupy the two Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia—accounting for 20 percent of Georgia’s territory.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4453>

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Since July 16, 2015, Moscow-backed security forces have been moving the administrative boundary fence dividing the Russian-occupied region of South Ossetia and the rest of Georgia—thereby placing more Georgian territory under Russian control. The most recent incident of this kind took place on August 10. Russia’s actions now place its administrative boundary fence within 550 yards of Georgia’s E60 highway, which is the main road linking the Black Sea to Azerbaijan. The new fence also places a one-mile segment of the BP-operated Baku-Supsa pipeline inside Russian-occupied territory.

Earlier this year, Russia signed so-called integration treaties with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Among other things, these treaties call for a coordinated foreign policy, the creation of a common security and defense space, and the implementation of a streamlined process for Abkhazians and South Ossetians to receive Russian citizenship. The Georgian Foreign Ministry criticized the treaty as a step toward the “annexation of Georgia’s occupied territories.”¹

The Long Road to NATO

Georgia was promised eventual membership at the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008. Since then, not all members of the Alliance have been supportive. This is especially true of those countries inside NATO that have an uncomfortably close relationship with Russia.

Some NATO members are concerned that Georgia’s entry into NATO would trigger an automatic 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.

During the two most recent NATO summits (2012 in Chicago, and 2014 in Wales), Georgia had hoped to receive a Membership Action Plan (MAP) but did not. MAP is a NATO program that offers assistance and practical support tailored to the individual needs of countries wishing to join. MAP was

first used in 1999, but there is no requirement for a candidate country to either receive or complete a MAP before joining the Alliance. Even though Georgia does not need a MAP to someday join the Alliance, Russia uses the repeated failure of Georgia to receive a MAP from NATO as a propaganda victory.

Helping Georgia Along the Transatlantic Path

The U.S. should use Khidasheli’s upcoming visit to recognize the important contribution to transatlantic security made by Georgia. The U.S. should:

- **Help the Georgians defend themselves.** Every country has the inherent right to self-defense. The U.S. should sell defensive anti-tank weapons—such as the FGM-148 Javelin “fire and forget” anti-tank missile—and anti-aircraft weaponry to Georgia. The Georgians live under the constant threat of further Russian aggression.
- **Publicly state that a Membership Action Plan is not required to join the Alliance.** Before the next NATO Summit in Poland in July 2016, President Barack Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry, and Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter should publicly state that Georgia does not need a MAP to join NATO.
- **Be clear about Georgia’s future membership.** In 2008, Georgia was promised eventual membership by the Alliance. This has been reaffirmed at every NATO summit since. The U.S. should make clear that Georgia’s political commitment to the transatlantic community, its successful completion of subsequent Annual National Programs, and the NATO–Georgia Commission, will help bring Georgia closer to ultimate membership.
- **Increase multilateral and bilateral training inside Georgia.** The more that U.S. and NATO flags fly in Georgia, the more committed the Georgian people will be to remaining on a path toward transatlantic integration. Military training exercises are the most visible sign of America’s and NATO’s support.

1. “Tbilisi Condemns Russia’s Move to Sign New Treaty with Sokhumi,” *Civil Georgia*, November 22, 2014, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27842> (accessed August 11, 2015).

- **Call the Russian military presence an occupation.** The U.S. should continue issuing high-level statements calling the presence of several thousand Russian troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia what it is: an occupation. Also, the U.S. should encourage more European countries to do so, as many have failed to publicly acknowledge this reality.
- **Increase targeted economic sanctions if either Abkhazia or South Ossetia is annexed by Russia.** The U.S. should make it very clear to Russia that annexation of either of the breakaway provinces will trigger stronger economic sanctions that target key Russian officials. The U.S. should start now to develop a strategy with its European partners to prepare for this eventuality.

A Great 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 Washington a perfect opportunity to strengthen the bilateral relationship with Tbilisi.

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