



POLICY PAPER

No. 3 (163), April 2018 © PISM

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Putting Georgia on the 2018 NATO Summit Agenda

Wojciech Lorenz

Russia's annexation of Crimea triggered a shift in NATO's policy towards Georgia. NATO moved from mainly political support for Georgia's NATO membership aspirations to enhanced practical military cooperation. Although it might be more difficult for Russia to coerce its small neighbour, the lack of visible progress on the path to NATO membership may weaken Georgian morale and lead to a reversal of democratic gains. Hence, it is important that during the 2018 NATO Summit in Brussels the Allies offer additional support to help Georgia increase its resilience.

After the annexation of Crimea by Russia, NATO decided to support the development of Georgia's defence capabilities with projects implemented right on Georgian territory. During the Wales summit in 2014, NATO approved a broad programme of cooperation (Substantial NATO-Georgia Package, or SNGP) to strengthen Georgia's military capability. Altogether, 12 programmes have been launched so far, with the leading role taken by the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Latvia, Norway, Poland, Turkey, and the UK.¹ More than 42 advisers from 26 NATO and partner countries offer training and advice to Georgian military and civilian institutions, including the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Interior. The NATO Military Committee announced its intent to increase the number of SNGP projects to 20 by the end of 2018, which can further increase the number of allies offering practical and political support for Georgia.

The NATO flagship project is the Joint Training and Evaluation Centre (JTEC), a permanent facility located outside Tbilisi and manned by NATO experts, which coordinates training of the Georgian military. NATO efforts to train company-size units (about 200 soldiers) will be coordinated with enhanced support for the Georgian military by the U.S. In summer 2018, the U.S. Army plans to open a training centre in Georgia to prepare troops for land warfare. The Joint Multinational Readiness Centre (JMRC) will be only the second such post (after Germany) outside the continental U.S. The centre will help train three Georgian infantry battalions a year to NATO standards. After training nine battalions (three brigades), the training activities will be taken over by NATO JTEC.

¹ The package includes 14 named projects: Joint Training and Evaluation Centre, Defence Institution Building School, Logistic Capability, Military Police, Special Operation Forces, Aviation, Air Defence, Cyber Defence, Maritime Security, Acquisition, Intelligence Sharing and Secure Communication, Strategic Communication, Crisis Management (not active), Counter Mobility (not active).

The Alliance also seems ready to increase its visibility in Georgia. In 2015, the originally bilateral U.S.-Georgia exercise *Agile Spirit* was taken over by NATO and expanded to the multinational level. The Alliance plans a large exercise with Georgia for 2019. In addition, U.S. Army Europe organises in Georgia the annual *Noble Partner* exercise, which is used for both political signalling and practical training. In 2017, about 1,600 troops from the U.S., 800 from Georgia, and 200 from Germany, Slovenia, Turkey, Ukraine, and the UK participated, making it the biggest event of this kind so far.

Such enhanced support for Georgian military training serves various purposes at the same time. It aims to strengthen Georgia's national defence and resilience in the face of Russian pressure. Georgian units increase interoperability with NATO and partner countries to participate in the NATO Response Force, a rapid reaction formation that can be used both for collective defence and crisis-management missions. The transformation of the armed forces and contribution to Euro-Atlantic security should enhance Tbilisi's chances for eventual membership in the Alliance. The visibility of foreign military may also have a reassuring effect and boost the morale of the general public.

Even though support for joining NATO among Georgians remains at 68% (higher than support for the Alliance in most NATO members except Poland and the Netherlands), disapproval of NATO membership has grown from 10% to 20%.² This might be a first warning sign that without the Western security umbrella and unequivocal signals of Western support, Georgian determination to resist the Russian pressure will wane, leading to a reversal of democratic gains. This would be a strategic success for Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose openly declared aim is to rebuild Russia's sphere of influence and to return the European security system to a concert of powers.³

Georgia's Ambitious Reforms

Georgia declared it wanted to join NATO even before the Rose Revolution of 2003, which enforced democratic reforms. The 2008 war with Russia complicated those efforts. The five-day conflict led to the *de facto* occupation of the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russian military. Aware of the negative consequences of a war on its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, Georgia embarked on a strategy of reunification by peaceful means.⁴ A policy of non-use of force was declared by then President Mikhail Saakashvili in 2010 during his speech to parliament and reconfirmed in a letter sent to the leadership of the EU, NATO, UN, OSCE and the U.S. president. This policy remains the basis for the mediations in the Geneva International Discussion forum, which addresses the humanitarian and security consequences of the 2008 war.

Georgia has also focused on political and economic reforms necessary for integration with NATO and EU. In 2014, it signed an Association Agreement with the European Union. According to the World Bank Group's *Doing Business* report, Georgia moved from 16th to 9th among 190 countries and continues to be a top reformer in Europe and Central Asia.⁵ During the last decade, Georgia has almost completely rid itself of dependence on Russian gas, switching to deliveries from Azerbaijan. It is also making progress in implementing democratic reforms.⁶ With Russian attempts to influence Georgia's political parties, business, and administration, combating corruption remains a challenge, but even in this field Georgia has made visible progress. It is by far the least corrupt country in Eastern Europe and Central Asia and ranks higher than nine NATO members (Italy, Slovakia, Croatia, Greece, Romania, Montenegro, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey).⁷

² D. Gilbreath, R. Shubladze, "Georgia: Disapproval Rising for NATO Membership," *Eurasianet*, 5 June 2017, www.eurasianet.org.

³ 70th Session of the UN General Assembly, 28 September 2015, www.kremlin.ru.

⁴ *State Strategy on Occupied Territories. Engagement through Cooperation*, Government of Georgia, 2010.

⁵ *Doing Business 2018: Georgia Ranked Highest in Europe and Central Asia Region*, World Bank, 31 October 2017, www.worldbank.org.

⁶ The Economist's Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, <https://infographics.economist.com/2018/DemocracyIndex>.

⁷ *Corruption Perception Index 2017*, Transparency International, 21 February 2018, www.transparency.org.

Despite significant losses of military material during the 2008 war, Georgia has consistently tried to demonstrate that even with limited potential it can be a net provider to Euro-Atlantic security. Before the war with Russia, it supported U.S.-led forces in Iraq with 2,200 troops. After the war, during the ISAF mission in Afghanistan it became the largest non-NATO and the largest per capita troop contributor, providing two full infantry battalions. With ISAF replaced by the *Resolute Support* mission, Georgia is still the largest non-NATO contributor with 885 troops. It also dedicated two companies to the NATO Response Force, a standing NATO multinational force that can be used quickly in numerous crisis scenarios.

Georgia has introduced extensive reforms not only to meet NATO standards but also to improve its ability to defend itself and deter aggression. Investments in anti-tank and air-defence systems, artillery, and reconnaissance remain the main priority. In July 2016, Georgia and the U.S. signed the Memorandum on Deepening the Defence and Security Partnership, which creates the legal basis for military aid and sale of advanced arms. In 2017, the U.S. approved the sale of 410 anti-tank Javelin missiles to Georgia at a cost of up to \$75 million. Tbilisi is also looking into the possibility of acquiring a loan from France to purchase a French short-range air-defence system.

However, the size of Georgia's defence budget does not allow for the substantial acquisition of new, technologically advanced weapons. Although the defence expenditure was increased by 11% last year, the whole defence budget amounted to \$310 million in 2017. Georgia also allocates only 6% of its budget for military modernisation. Although the Georgian economy has been growing on average by 3% a year for the last decade, a significant improvement in Georgia's defences will not be possible without more efficient allocation of resources and support from other countries.

Shift in NATO Strategy within the Same Paradigm

Despite those achievements, building consensus in NATO on Georgia's membership will be challenging, both politically and militarily, especially after the change in European security caused by Russia's policy of aggression. Already in 1990 NATO changed its strategy from forward defence to the ability to reinforce threatened Allies. NATO's post-Cold War strategy was, on one hand, based on an open-door policy and, on the other, on balancing the enlargement with deepened cooperation with Russia. To limit the risk of a negative backlash from Russia and to maintain internal cohesion within the Alliance, in 1997 NATO members gave Russia political assurances they would not deploy substantial combat forces on the territory of the new members. Such assurances became an integral part of the post-Cold War security paradigm in Europe. Even if from a legal point of view they did not limit NATO's ability to move troops to defend Allies, in practical terms they constrained the development of plans and logistics to make such a deployment possible. NATO was also hesitant to put Georgia on a formal pathway to membership, being afraid of provoking Russia. The Allies have been concerned that the separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, supported by Russia, could draw NATO into a conflict. Nevertheless in 2008, the U.S. (and Poland) was ready to offer Georgia a Membership Action Plan (MAP), a programme of advice and practical support designed to help prepare a candidate country for membership. Although the programme does not assume the Alliance has agreed future membership, it is perceived as a final act before joining the organisation. Because of a lack of consensus, NATO decided to address the question of offering MAP during the ministerial meeting of December 2008. Instead of putting Georgia on a formal pathway to membership, the Allies made a political commitment that Georgia (and Ukraine) would become members of the Alliance.⁸ Even though Putin, who intensively lobbied against NATO granting MAP to Georgia, seemed satisfied with such a solution, a clash between the separatists and Georgian military in August 2008 triggered a massive Russian counterattack. Russian troops almost completely destroyed Georgia's military facilities, ports, airfields, and naval capabilities.

⁸ Bucharest Summit Declaration, Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest on 3 April 2008, www.nato.int.

The disproportionate Russian reaction, which was not deterred by the presence of U.S. military instructors in Georgia, was a clear attempt to undermine the credibility of the Alliance's open-door policy. In 2011, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev openly admitted that the war helped stop NATO enlargement.⁹ Initially, NATO suspended cooperation with Russia, but then it sent an ambiguous signal, which could have resulted in negative, strategic consequences. In March 2009, NATO foreign ministers decided to resume the formal dialogue in the NATO-Russia Council, although Moscow did not withdraw troops from the occupied territories to the positions from before the conflict, which was part of the ceasefire agreement. In September 2009, military cooperation between NATO and Russia resumed. The new 2010 NATO strategic concept stressed that the Alliance was determined to develop a strategic partnership with Russia. This in turn was used as an invitation for major European powers to help modernise the Russian armed forces and broaden cooperation in the energy sector. For Russia, this could have been a signal that NATO members would not impose significant costs on Moscow for a violation of the basic principles of the security order in Europe.

Moscow recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and started to change the administrative line dividing Georgian territory into a border. It did not agree on UN or OSCE missions to Georgia and declined access for EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) observers to separatist regions. Russia has integrated the separatist military into its own, absorbing the regions by stealth. It also attempts to undermine the Georgian strategy of peaceful reintegration of the breakaway regions. As in communist times, when the Soviet Union persecuted its citizens for contact with the West, Russian security services actively discourage people-to-people contacts between Georgia and Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It cannot be excluded that the lack of meaningful support for Georgia influenced Putin's calculations when he decided to annex Crimea and incite internal conflict in the eastern part of Ukraine to block it from Euro-Atlantic integration.

The annexation of Crimea triggered a markedly different response from NATO than the Russian attack against Georgia. The Allies decided to implement measures to strengthen their own sense of security and influence the Russian leadership's calculations. NATO established multinational battalion battle groups in the Baltic States and Poland and increased its presence in the Black Sea region to strengthen deterrence. It also started to adjust its command structure and military capabilities to have a credible option to reinforce threatened countries. However, NATO's decisions have not changed the general paradigm of the security order. The military presence is rotational and below a level Russia could reasonably interpret as substantial combat forces. The whole defence strategy remains based on the ability to reinforce rather than maintain large, static military units in one place, which would constrain the Allied ability to respond to threats and challenges in other regions. Nevertheless, within a few years, provided that the Allies increase defence spending and develop necessary military capabilities, the credibility of NATO deterrence and defence will be significantly improved.

At the same time, NATO has faced a dilemma in how to respond to Russian readiness to use force against Alliance partners. NATO tried to demonstrate support for Georgia by intensifying political contact through the NATO-Georgia Commission, which was established just after the war of 2008. The Alliance reconfirmed its commitment that Georgia will be a member of NATO during its summits in Strasbourg/Kehl 2009, Lisbon in 2010, Chicago 2012, Wales 2014 and Warsaw 2016. Such a commitment was also included in the 2010 Strategic Concept. These demonstrations of political support, however, have been supported with few concrete actions.

Only after the annexation of Crimea did NATO decide to demonstrate that Russia's tactics will not enforce a change in NATO enlargement policy. In December 2015, the Allies invited Montenegro to join and it officially became a member in June 2017. The Alliance also moved from mainly political support for Georgia to a concept called enhanced practical cooperation, based on the principle "more NATO in Georgia, and

⁹ D. Dyomkin, "Russia Says Georgia War Stopped NATO Expansion," *Reuters*, 21 November 2011, www.reuters.com.

more Georgia in NATO.” The Substantial Georgia NATO Package was designed to help the country meet NATO standards, even without participation in a Membership Action Plan.

At the same time, NATO as a political-military alliance must take military realities into consideration. Any plans to bring Georgia closer to NATO and to offer it meaningful security guarantees need to be based on realistic strategic and military assessments. Russian troops stationed inside Georgia are within striking distance of the capital, Tbilisi, and main transport routes, which are crucial for military reinforcements. To be able to deter aggression, NATO would have to either change its strategy and maintain substantial combat forces in Georgia or develop significantly larger potential to project power. With such potential it would still face numerous operational challenges. The Montreux convention, which gives control over the Turkish straits to Turkey limits vessels from non-Black Sea states from entering the sea. The ability to reinforce Georgia by air and sea would be limited by Russian defensive and offensive systems (A2/AD), which block access to a larger part of the Black Sea basin. In that case, the major portion of the reinforcements would have to be moved through Turkish territory.

NATO enlargement without credible options to defend Georgia would offer Russia a useful tool to undermine Alliance credibility. Russian forces could under any pretext provoke another conflict, with NATO being unable to retain the status quo. Since Russia clearly indicates in its 2015 National Security Concept that it wants to impose a new security system on Europe, one not based on NATO and the EU, the risk that the Kremlin would seek the opportunity to display NATO’s inability to act has to be seriously considered. Hence, the Alliance needs first to invest in its reinforcement capabilities to make enlargement to the post-Soviet space a credible option in the future.

Georgia on the NATO Summit Agenda

Although putting Georgia on a formal pathway to NATO will take time, a shift in Alliance policy offers new opportunities to keep the small democracy outside the Russian sphere of influence. During the NATO summit in July, the Allies should send a clear signal that relations with Georgia, which has painstakingly introduced democratic and market reforms, are in principle of a different quality than with undemocratic Russia, which is a strategic challenge for the Alliance. Instead of looking for ways to resume military cooperation with Russia, the Alliance should grant Georgia a privileged consultation mechanism, which would allow emergency consultations within the NATO-Georgia Commission. The new package of practical cooperation could include elements of planning and exercises based on NATO collective-defence scenarios. This would better prepare both NATO and Georgia for Russian attempts to exert military pressure in the Black Sea region.

NATO could also consider setting up a Trust Fund for military modernisation. Even if limited to non-lethal military equipment, it could significantly increase Georgia’s ability to defend itself and deter threats, limiting the risk of future Russian adventurism.

At the same time, NATO and the EU should work together to maximise Western potential to enhance Georgia’s security. The Alliance and the bloc could launch an open-source and human intelligence centre (OSCINT and HUMINT) in Georgia. The lack of situational awareness, both in the case of Georgia and Ukraine, to a large extent paralysed the coordinated response of NATO and the EU to the Russian aggression. The centre would help the Allies better assess Russian intentions in the Black Sea basin and would make it more difficult for individual member states to turn a blind eye to security challenges in the region. This would enable timely reaction to different threats to Georgia but also to littoral NATO states Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria and to partners such as Armenia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine.

Georgia should also assess membership in the EU not only in economic terms but also as a strategic option for achieving additional security guarantees which in declarative terms are less ambiguous than Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. Although the EU lacks the military structures and defence mechanisms of NATO, such guarantees could contribute to deterrence by increasing the chance that EU members would have to react to aggression against Georgia, imposing political, economic, and military costs on the aggressor.

The Association Agreement with the EU already opens the way for the EU-Georgia Strategic Security Dialogue, which should be used to exploit EU potential as a security actor in the region. This could help generate greater support among the major EU powers (Germany, France and Italy) to Georgia's case, which will be crucial for building consensus on NATO and EU enlargement.

Coordinated policy between EU and NATO but also OSCE will be required to exert constant pressure on Russia to withdraw troops from occupied territories and reintroduce OSCE presence. Even if the chances that it will make any effect are not high it will demonstrate to Russia that attempts to undermine the territorial integrity of other countries brings long-term political costs.

Such a coordinated and meaningful strategy should decrease the risk that the Georgian reforms will be reversed under the constant pressure from Russia. Georgia would receive additional tools to reassure its citizens as well as Western partners. Whereas NATO and the EU will have time to understand that Georgia's significance to the post-Cold War European security system is much bigger than individual member states are still ready to admit.