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Brussels NATO Summit 2018: Keep Georgia on the Path Toward Membership

Luke Coffey

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in Brussels on July 11 and 12 offers an opportunity for the Alliance to thank Georgia for its contribution in Afghanistan, congratulate Georgia on its military reforms, and lay the groundwork for deeper cooperation and paving the way to eventual membership.

The U.S. should continue to support Georgia's NATO aspirations and ensure that the summit delivers a capabilities package that will enhance the NATO-Georgian relationship while improving Georgia's defensive military capabilities. The Alliance should live up to its 2008 promise and keep Georgia on track for NATO membership. Georgian NATO membership would bring more stability to the South Caucasus and transatlantic regions.

A Reliable Partner

After the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and the subsequent occupation of 20 percent of its territory, Georgia has transformed its military and has been steadfast in its support of NATO as well as non-NATO U.S.-led overseas security operations. Georgia has contributed thousands of troops to Iraq and Afghanistan and hundreds of peacekeepers to the Balkans and Africa. Even with the Russian invasion and its aftermath, Georgia has not been deterred

from getting closer to the West. This has made Georgia a net contributor to transatlantic security.

Georgia is important to the Alliance for three main reasons:

- 1. Georgia is a proven and dependable ally in places like Iraq and Afghanistan.** It is not well-known that 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 were rushing for the door in Afghanistan, Georgia added hundreds of troops to the mission there. At the height of the Georgian contribution to Afghanistan, it had more than 2,000 troops serving in some of the deadliest places in the country, if not the world, in Helmand and Kandahar provinces. Today, Georgia has 870 troops in Afghanistan, making it the largest non-NATO troop contributor to the NATO training mission.
- 2. Georgia's strategic location makes it important for U.S. geopolitical objectives in the Eurasian region.** Located in the South Caucasus, Georgia sits at a crucial geographical and cultural crossroads and has proven itself to be strategically important for military and economic reasons for centuries. Today, Georgia's strategic location is just as important. For example, Georgia offered its territory, infrastructure, and logistic capabilities for the transit of NATO forces and cargo for Afghanistan. Over the years, Georgia has modernized key airports and port facilities in the country. This is particularly important when it comes to the Black Sea

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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

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region. Key pipelines like the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline, the Baku–Supsa pipeline, and the soon-to-be-operational Southern Gas Corridor transit Georgia, as do important rail lines like the recently opened Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway. The oil and gas pipelines are particularly important to Europe’s energy security, and therefore NATO’s interest in the region.

3. Georgia’s journey to democracy is an example for the region. Since regaining independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia has been on a journey to democracy. For the sake of regional stability, it is in America’s interest that Georgia remains on this path. Over the years, successive Georgian governments have pursued an agenda of liberalizing the economy, cutting bureaucracy, fighting corruption, and embracing democracy. Since the peaceful Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia has been firmly committed to the transatlantic community. Georgia also represents the idea in Europe that each country has the sovereign ability to determine its own path, and to decide with whom it has relations, and how and by whom it is governed. Territorial integrity must be respected and no outside actor (in this case, Russia) should have a veto on membership or relationships with organizations like the European Union or NATO.

The Long Road to NATO

Few countries in Europe 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, but more work remains to be done. Georgia was first promised eventual membership at the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008. Since then, this commitment to membership has been reaffirmed at each subsequent NATO summit. Not all members of the Alliance have been as supportive as they could be. This is especially true of those NATO members that have an uncomfortably close relationship with Russia.

During the three most recent NATO summits (2012 in Chicago, 2014 in Wales, and 2016 in Warsaw), 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. While Georgia does not need a MAP to someday join the Alliance, Russia uses the repeated failure of Georgia receiving a MAP from NATO as a propaganda victory.

Even though Georgia has not received a MAP, it has a relationship with NATO that far exceeds the traditional MAP. The relationship includes the Annual National Program, the NATO–Georgia Commission, and the Substantial NATO–Georgia Package. The NATO–Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Centre (JTEC) was opened in August 2015. Georgia also has twice contributed an infantry company to the NATO Response Force—quite a commitment for a country that is not a member of the Alliance. As NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said in December 2016: “Georgia has all the practical tools to become a member of NATO.”¹

Some NATO members are concerned that Georgia’s entry into NATO would trigger an automatic war with Russia over its occupation of the Tskhinvali Region and Abkhazia. Georgian officials privately 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.² To demonstrate its commitment, Georgia made a “non-use of force” pledge regarding the occupied territories that Russia has failed to do.

No third party, such as Russia, should have a veto over any decision of the sovereign member states of NATO. Rather, it is for the democratic countries that make up the Alliance to decide whether to admit new members. All decisions made by the Alliance require unanimity, including those regarding enlargement.

1 Thea Morrison, “Stoltenberg: Georgia Has All Practical Tools to Become NATO Member,” *Georgia Today*, December 3, 2016, <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/5297/Stoltenberg%3A-Georgia-Has-All-Practical-Tools-to-Become-NATO-Member> (accessed December 29, 2017).

2 In the event that Georgia is invited to join NATO, the temporary exclusion of NATO’s Article 5 protection to the Russian-occupied Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia could be added to an amended Article 6 of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty. There is precedent to amending Article 6. The definition of the territories to which Article 5 applies could be revised by Georgia’s accession Protocol to the North Atlantic Treaty in the same way it was revised when Greece and Turkey joined in 1951. This would only be a temporary measure until Georgia’s full internationally recognized territory is re-established by peaceful and diplomatic means at a future date.

MAP 1

Russian-Occupied Territory in Georgia



SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

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Keeping Georgia on the Right Path

Since this year marks the 10th anniversary of the Bucharest Summit, many in Georgia will be watching the Brussels Summit closely. Keeping NATO focused on Georgia's Euro-Atlantic path will require American leadership. The U.S. needs to ensure that the upcoming summit recognizes Georgia's commitment and sacrifices to transatlantic security. The U.S. and NATO should:

- **Ensure that the NATO-Georgia Commission meeting takes place separately and at the heads-of-government level.** Currently, this meeting is planned as a joint meeting with the NATO-Ukraine Commission. This sends the wrong signal to the Georgian people. Ukraine and Georgia share many common challenges, especially as they pertain to Russia. However, Georgia's path toward NATO membership is far ahead

of Ukraine's. In terms of NATO membership NATO should avoid coupling Georgia's fate with that of Ukraine. The NATO-Georgian Commission should be held at the heads-of-government level, and be separate from any other meeting, to demonstrate the importance NATO assigns to its relationship with Georgia.

- **Make it clear that a Membership Action Plan is not required.** It is a common misconception that a MAP is a requirement for joining the Alliance. NATO members should not use this technicality as a road block for Georgia's future membership. With the Annual National Program, the NATO-Georgia Commission, and the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package, Georgia's relationship with NATO is closer now than it would have been under the traditional MAP.

- **Ensure that the Alliance is clear on Georgia's future membership.** The summit declaration should make it clear that Georgia's successful completion of subsequent Annual National Programs, the close relationship through the NATO–Georgia Commission, and the Substantial NATO–Georgia Package are the true markers of progress that will bring Georgia closer to ultimate membership.
- **Refer to the Russian military presence as an occupation.** In the summit declaration, NATO should call the presence of several thousand Russian troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia what it is: an occupation. To date, many European countries have failed to use this terminology. Given events in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, it is more important than ever that NATO send a united and clear message.

A Staunch Ally

Georgia is a staunch ally of the U.S. and NATO. It is located in a dangerous and important geopolitical neighborhood for NATO. Georgians have proven themselves to be gallant in combat. They are also undertaking a defense transformation program that is an example to all of NATO. The Brussels Summit provides the Alliance with a perfect opportunity to strengthen the bilateral relationship with Tbilisi and keep Georgia on the path toward membership.

—*Luke Coffey is Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.*