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RUSSIA'S OCCUPATION OF GEORGIA AND THE EROSION OF THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER

**Testimony before The Commission on Security and
Cooperation in Europe (US Helsinki Commission)**

July 17, 2018

Luke Coffey

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

Chairman Wicker, Co-Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Cardin, Ranking Member Hastings, and distinguished Commissioners I am honored to speak before your esteemed Commission about the importance of the Republic of Georgia to the United States.

My name is Luke Coffey. I am the Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy in the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own, and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

In August 2008, while the world was fixated on the Summer Olympics in Beijing, a Russian invasion force comprised of hundreds of Russian tanks and armored vehicles passed through the Roki tunnel on the Russian–Georgian border. At the time, Russian troops got within miles of the Republic of Georgia’s capital city of Tbilisi and even bombed the civilian airport there. Hostilities were finally brought to an end after a Six Point Ceasefire Agreement was brokered by then–French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Almost a decade later, thousands of Russian troops occupy Abkhazia and the region around Tskhinvali, the so-called capital of South Ossetia,¹ which together equal 20 percent of Georgia’s internationally recognized territory. If a foreign army occupied the equivalent one-fifth of the contiguous U.S., it would be comparable to all land west of the Rocky Mountains. Russia invaded Georgia, not the other way around. Russia is the aggressor, and Georgia is the victim.

Georgia is a staunch U.S. ally and has sacrificed greatly in places like Afghanistan, where it is the largest non–North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troop contributor and has suffered the most troops killed in action on a per capita basis. Georgia’s location in the South Caucasus on the Black Sea is strategically important for the U.S. for a number reasons, be they economic, trade-related, concerning the transit of energy to Western Europe, or for military and security reasons. Since it regained independence in 1991 after the break-up of the Soviet Union, Georgia has been a beacon of hope in an otherwise turbulent region. It has seen successive peaceful transfers of power in open and free elections. It has embraced economic reforms to liberalize its economy. It has sought a deeper relationship with transatlantic organizations.

The year 2018 is an important year for the U.S.–NATO–Georgian relationship. Not only does it mark the 10th anniversary of Russia’s military aggression against Georgia, it also marks the 10th anniversary of NATO’s promise to Georgia of eventual membership in the Alliance during the Bucharest Summit. Furthermore, the NATO Summit planned for July 2018 in Brussels offers the Alliance a chance to take the NATO–Georgia relationship to a new level of closeness, while keeping Georgia firmly and speedily on the path to full membership. Also

¹The term “South Ossetia” is commonly used to describe the area north of Tbilisi that is under illegal Russian occupation. This name is derived from the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast created in 1922 by the Soviet Union. In 1991, the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast declared independence from the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic which kicked off the 1991–1992 South Ossetia War. When Georgia regained its independence from the Soviet Union later in 1991, it established 11 internal subdivisions (two autonomous republics and nine regions). The area in Georgia that attempted to break away in 1991, that now has been under Russian occupation since 2008, is commonly referred to as “South Ossetia.” However, “South Ossetia” is not one of the 11 subdivisions of Georgia, but instead includes parts of Mtskheta-Mtianeti, Shida Kartli, Imereti, Racha-Lechkhumi, and the Kvemo Svaneti regions. Since using the term South Ossetia feeds into Russia’s propaganda, this *Backgrounder* will refer to this region as the “Tskhinvali region.” (The biggest city under Russian occupation is Tskhinvali.)

important, 2018 will be the year that Georgia finally receives the long-sought Javelin anti-tank missile, marking a step forward in the U.S.–Georgia bilateral relationship.

MAP 1

Russian-Occupied Territory in Georgia



SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

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An Important U.S. Ally

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 overseas security operations. It spends 4 percent of its gross domestic product on defense, far exceeding the NATO standard of 2 percent. 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 U.S. for three main reasons:

1. **Georgia is a proven and dependable U.S. 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.² 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 the Helmand and Kandahar provinces. On a per capita basis Georgia has suffered the most killed in combat—even though it has only had a sizeable presence in the country for about half the time of the campaign.³ Today, Georgia has 870 troops in Afghanistan, making it the largest non-NATO troop contributor to the NATO training mission.⁴

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 to the U.S. 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 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 Kars–Tbilisi–Baku railway. The oil and gas pipelines are particularly important to Europe’s energy security, and therefore U.S. national 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 closer relations with organizations like the European Union or NATO.

Georgia’s fondness of freedom and liberty are nothing new. As the British diplomat and foremost Kartvelian, Sir Oliver Wardrop, wrote in his 1888 book, *The Kingdom of Georgia: Travel in a Land of Woman, Wine and Song*:

It is interesting to notice that the political ideas of the country are borrowed from Western Europe. Excepting in Japan, perhaps, there is no such instance of a people

²In his memoir *Duty*, the U.S. Secretary of Defense at the time, Robert Gates, writes that the airlift of 1,800 Georgian soldiers from Iraq to Georgia “began on August 10 and was completed the next day, and on August 13 I directed that the humanitarian assistance begin. There was no interference from the Russians.” See Robert Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015), p. 170.

³Since 2010, 32 Georgians have been killed in Afghanistan. See “Georgian Soldier Killed in Afghanistan,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 4, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgian-soldier-killed-in-afghanistan/28658473.html> (accessed December 20, 2017).

⁴NATO, “Resolute Support Mission (RSM): Key Facts and Figures,” May 2017, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_05/20170523_2017-05-RSM-Placemat.pdf (accessed December 20, 2017).

passing directly from feudalism to liberalism. The grandsons of absolute monarchs, the men who little more than a quarter of a century ago were large slave-owners, are now ardent champions on the democratic idea and loudly proclaim the freedom, the equality, and the brotherhood, of prince and peasant, master and man.⁵

While decades of Russian and Soviet domination have slowed down democratic progress, Georgia has been quickly making up for lost time since 1991. The U.S. must do everything it can to keep Georgia down the path of economic progress, democracy, and transatlantic and euroatlantic integration.

U.S.–Georgian Relationship

The first U.S. diplomatic presence in Georgia was established in 1886 when a U.S. Consulate opened in Batumi.⁶ In 1915, during the early stages of World War I and the threat of the Ottoman invasion of Batumi, the U.S. Consulate was moved to Tbilisi. Of course, during this period Georgia was firmly under the control of the Russian Empire. After the collapse of the Russian Empire in the aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution, the newly independent Democratic Republic of Georgia was established from 1918 to 1921. During this brief period of independence, the U.S. did not establish diplomatic relations with Georgia because the State Department was worried about the fallout caused by newly independent states resulting from post-revolutionary Russia. According to then–U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing, “[I]t has been thought unwise and unfair to prejudice in advance of the establishment of orderly, constitutional government in Russia, the principle of Russian unity as a whole.”⁷

Georgia regained its independence on December 25, 1991. Formal diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Georgia were established by President George H. W. Bush on March 24, 1992, and the new American embassy was opened on April 23 of that year.⁸

Since 1991, the U.S.–Georgian relationship has been multifaceted, focusing on a broad spectrum of issues including democratization, economic reforms, judicial reforms, cultural issues, and business and investment opportunities. Perhaps the area with the biggest impact on the bilateral relationship is in the defense and security field—but even this cooperation did not begin in earnest until 2002 and started with a major focus on counterterrorism operations. This early military cooperation focusing on counterterrorism eventually evolved into preparing Georgia for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Elements of the U.S. Marine Corps Black Sea Rotational Force often visit Georgia for joint training missions, and U.S. Navy vessels often call into Georgian ports during Black Sea visits. These visits to the Black Sea have been particularly important since Russia’s illegal annexation of Ukraine’s Crimea Peninsula in 2014.⁹ Since this time, Russia has established a

⁵Oliver Wardrop, *The Kingdom of Georgia: Travel in a Land of Women, Wine, and Song* (London: Luzac & Company, Ltd., 1888), pp. 164 and 165.

⁶Peter Bridges, “Georgia and America: Early Contacts,” *American Diplomacy*, November 2011, http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/item/2011/0912/ca/bridges_georgia.html (accessed December 20, 2017).

⁷“No Recognition for Lithuania,” *The New York Times*, February 10, 1920, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1920/02/10/118260076.html?pageNumber=17> (accessed December 28, 2017).

⁸U.S. Embassy Georgia, “Policy & History,” <https://ge.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/> (accessed December 28, 2017).

⁹For Russia, domination of the Black Sea region has always been considered a matter of national survival. Russian Black Sea ports, being Russia’s only warm water ports, have always served the economic interests of Russia. For

robust anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capability, which threatens NATO and non-NATO partners in the region.

There are two major bilateral annual military exercises that provide the backbone of U.S.–Georgian defense cooperation. In 2011, exercise Agile Spirit began as a bilateral training event to prepare Georgian soldiers deploying to Afghanistan. Today, this exercise invites other European partners to participate. For example, in 2017 more than 1,500 troops from the U.S., Georgia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Latvia, Romania, and Ukraine participated in Agile Spirit.¹⁰

The other important bilateral exercise is Noble Partner.¹¹ This exercise first started in 2014 and was primarily used to improve Georgia’s interoperability with NATO, train Georgians to NATO standards, and serve as a means to certify Georgia’s contribution to the NATO Response Force. In addition, the (U.S. state) Georgia Army National Guard and the (U.S. state) Georgia Air National Guard annually participate in the exercise. In 2017, Armenia, Germany, Slovenia, Turkey, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom also sent troops.

Throughout these years of defense and security bilateral cooperation, NATO has played a significant role. Some of the most important programs and events in the U.S.–NATO–Georgian relationship include:

- **1994: Georgia joins NATO’s Partnership for Peace program.** This program was established in 1991 after the break-up of the Soviet Union and serves as a framework for closer cooperation. The goal is to promote security partnerships between NATO and non-NATO nations in the broader region.
- **1994: State Partnership Program between the U.S. State of Georgia and the Republic of Georgia started.** The State Partnership Program started in 1991 and is managed by the National Guard Bureaus. The program pairs U.S. state National Guard units with partner countries to deepen cooperation and improve military capabilities. The Georgia State Partnership Program with the Republic of Georgia is still active today.
- **2002: Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP).** After 9/11, the U.S. aimed to increase its counterterrorism cooperation around the world. In 2002, Georgia requested assistance from the U.S. to confront internal terrorism threats from Chechen rebels in Georgia’s Panksi Gorge, a small and narrow valley in a region bordering Chechnya about 100 miles from the capital of Tbilisi.
- **2005: Georgia Sustainment and Stability Program started.** This training and equipping program helped prepare Georgian troops for deployments to Iraq after the U.S. led the invasion in 2003. Georgia was a committed partner during Operation Iraqi Freedom, with more than 7,800 Georgian troops deploying to Iraq throughout the operation. At the time of the Russian invasion in 2008, Georgia had the second-largest number of troops in Iraq after the United States.

example, on the eve of World War I, 50 percent of all Russian exports, and 90 percent of its agricultural exports, passed through the Turkish Straits out of the Black Sea. Today, every 15 minutes an oil tanker passes through the Turkish Straits of the Black Sea carrying Russian oil or Kazakh oil. (The latter first crosses through Russia so that Moscow receives transit fees.)

¹⁰Agenda.Ge, “Agile Spirit 2017 Multinational Drills End,” September 11, 2017, <http://agenda.ge/news/86670/eng> (accessed December 29, 2017).

¹¹U.S. Army Europe, “Noble Partner 2017,” <http://www.eur.army.mil/noblepartner/> (accessed December 29, 2017).

- **2005: Bilateral Defense Consultations established.** Bilateral Defense Consultations were created as the primary mechanism to improve ways to deepen U.S.–Georgian bilateral relations. Meetings are held annually and focus on helping Georgia reform its Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces.
- **2008: NATO Bucharest Summit.** The Bucharest Summit is considered the beginning of what has become a very long process of Georgia eventually joining NATO. The Summit Declaration stated: “NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.”¹²
- **2008: NATO–Georgia Commission (NGC) created.** The NGC was established in September 2008 to build on the pledge of eventual NATO membership made earlier in the year during the Bucharest Summit. The NGC serves as a forum for both political consultations and practical cooperation to help Georgia achieve its goal of membership in NATO.¹³
- **2008: Annual National Program (ANP) begins.** The ANP is a tool used by NATO to establish reforms and policy priorities to help aspiring countries on the path to full membership. Since 2008, Georgia has successfully implemented nine cycles of the ANP.¹⁴
- **2009: U.S.–Georgia Strategic Partnership Commission established.** This program established four high-level working groups to advance the bilateral relationship in: democracy; defense and security; economic, trade, and energy issues; and people-to-people and cultural exchanges.¹⁵ One of the four working groups includes a Defense and Security Working Group, which meets annually to help deepen U.S.–Georgian security cooperation.
- **2009: Georgian Deployment Program begins.** This training and equipping program helped prepare Georgian troops for deployments to Afghanistan as part of the NATO-led operation there. Since 2009, more than 12,000 Georgian troops have served in Afghanistan, and on a per capita basis they have suffered the most combat deaths of any coalition partner.
- **2012: Enhanced Defense Cooperation started.** This agreement was built on previous U.S.–Georgian bilateral agreements in the area of defense. The Enhanced Defense Cooperation initiative aimed to help Georgia’s military modernization, increase NATO interoperability, and assist with defense reforms.
- **2014: Substantial NATO–Georgia Package created.** At the 2014 NATO summit in Wales, the Alliance agreed to an initiative which expanded NATO’s already close relationship with Georgia. Specifically, 13 programs were established focused on improving Georgia’s

¹²NATO, “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,” http://www.summitbucharest.ro/en/doc_201.html (accessed December 28, 2017).

¹³NATO, “NATO–Georgia Commission,” December 4, 2012, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52131.htm (accessed December 20, 2017).

¹⁴Office of the State Minister of Georgia on European & Euro-Atlantic Integration, “Annual National Program/ANP,” <http://eu-nato.gov.ge/en/nato/relations/integration/ANP> (accessed December 29, 2017).

¹⁵U.S. Department of State, “U.S.–Georgia Strategic Partnership Commission,” <https://www.state.gov/p/eur/ci/gg/usgeorgiacommission/> (accessed December 20, 2017).

territorial defensive capabilities and prepare Georgia to join NATO. Georgia is the only non-NATO country to have ever received such a package from NATO.

- **2016: Memorandum on Deepening the Defense and Security Partnership between the United States of America and Georgia.** To mark the 25th anniversary of Georgia regaining its independence, this memorandum reaffirmed the strategic partnership between the U.S. and Georgia.¹⁶ This also launched the Georgia Defense Readiness Program, which, for the first time, focused on improving Georgia’s territorial defense capabilities instead of counterinsurgency capabilities needed in Afghanistan.
- **2017: U.S.–Georgia General Security of Information Agreement (GSOIA).** The GSOIA agreement marked “a major milestone in security cooperation between the United States and Georgia.”¹⁷ This agreement improves intelligence sharing between the two countries and opens the door for future agreements on security cooperation and intelligence sharing.

So far, the U.S.–Georgian relationship has thrived under the Trump Administration. Vice President Mike Pence made an early visit to Georgia in the summer of 2017, which was viewed as a major success. Crucially, he referred to the Russian military presence in the Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia as an “occupation.”¹⁸

In November 2017, the U.S. announced two very important steps to take the U.S.–Georgian defense relationship to another level. First, the U.S. announced an historic sale of Javelin anti-tank missiles to Georgia. The total package includes 410 missiles and 72 launchers.¹⁹ The Georgians tried for several years during the Obama Administration to get Javelins from the U.S. with no success. Second, the U.S. agreed at the same time to refocus military cooperation on improving the territorial defense capabilities of the Georgian Armed Forces—a stark change from the years of only training Georgians for counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan. The Heritage Foundation called for both of these steps to be taken years ago and it welcomes this important and timely move by the Trump Administration.²⁰

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.

NATO’s open-door policy for qualified countries has contributed greatly to transatlantic security since the first round of enlargement in 1952, helping to ensure the Alliance’s central

¹⁶U.S. Embassy in Georgia, “Memorandum on Deepening the Defense and Security Partnership Between the United States of America and Georgia (July 6),” July 6, 2016, <https://ge.usembassy.gov/memorandum-deepening-defense-security-partnership-united-states-america-georgia-july-6/> (accessed December 29, 2017).

¹⁷U.S. Department of State, “United States and Georgia Sign General Security of Information Agreement,” May 9, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/05/270754.htm> (accessed December 29, 2017).

¹⁸“Pence Reaffirms U.S. Solidarity with Georgia, Denounces Russian ‘Aggression,’” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 1, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/pence-georgia-montenegro-nato-russia-baltics-visit/28652154.html> (accessed December 29, 2017).

¹⁹News release, “Georgia–Javelin Missiles and Command Launch Units,” Defense Security Cooperation Agency, November 20, 2017, <http://www.dsca.mil/major-arms-sales/georgia-javelin-missiles-and-command-launch-units> (accessed December 29, 2017).

²⁰Luke Coffey, “NATO Summit 2014: An Opportunity to Support Georgia,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4260, August 13, 2014, <http://www.heritage.org/trade/report/nato-summit-2014-opportunity-support-georgia>.

place as the prime guarantor of security in Europe. The North Atlantic Treaty's Article 10 states that any European state that is "in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area" may join the Alliance.²¹ There are three official aspirant countries hoping to join NATO: the Republic of Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Georgia.

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. Sadly, 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.

Georgia's journey to NATO membership has been a long, and at times, frustrating one.

During the most recent NATO summits (2012 in Chicago, 2014 in Wales, 2016 in Warsaw, 2018 in Brussels), 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 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."²²

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.²³ To demonstrate

²¹The North Atlantic Treaty, Article 10, April 4, 1949, last updated March 21, 2016, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm (accessed January 10, 2017).

²²Thea 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).

²³In 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.

its commitment, Georgia made a “non-use of force” pledge regarding the occupied territories that Russia has failed to do.²⁴

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 on whether to admit new members. All decisions made by the Alliance require unanimity, including those regarding enlargement.

Russia’s Continued Aggression

President Vladimir Putin’s actions are often described as Cold War behavior reminiscent of the Soviet Union. Such a characterization is by and large incorrect: Today, the West is dealing with an imperial Russia, not Soviet Russia. Under Putin’s leadership, Russian policy is more reminiscent of what was seen in the time of the czar before the 1917 Russian Revolution. Putin is an imperial leader—under his leadership Russia is a 21st-century country with 19th-century ambitions. Thanks to his constitutional changes, he has been either prime minister or president of Russia since 1999 and can remain in either one of these positions for as long as he lives.

Therefore, Putin sees Russia’s role in the region through an imperial lens. This is especially true in Georgia. Russia views the South Caucasus as being in its natural sphere of influence and stands ready to exert its influence in the region by military force if necessary.

Russia’s primary strategic goal in Georgia (as it is in Ukraine) is to keep countries which were once under Russian or Soviet domination out of the Western community.

After the war in August 2008, the Geneva International Discussions were established in order to find a diplomatic solution to the invasion. These talks between Russia and Georgia are co-chaired by the European Union, the United Nations, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and with participation by the U.S. However, for the most part the Geneva International Discussions talks are gridlocked.

Almost 10 years later Russia is still in violation of two main points of the Six Point Ceasefire Agreement brokered by then–French President Nicholas Sarkozy in August 2008. These two points are:

- 1) Russian military forces must pull back to their locations before the start of hostilities.²⁵

²⁴Civil Georgia, “Georgia Makes ‘Unilateral Pledge’ of Non-Use of Force,” November 23, 2010, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22880> (accessed December 29, 2017).

²⁵During the 1990s, separatists in both Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region declared independence from Georgia. This resulted in a bloody conflict leaving thousands dead and hundreds of thousands of ethnic Georgians internally displaced. By 1994, Russia led a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) peacekeeping operation in Abkhazia, which was monitored by an ineffective and unarmed United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG). In the Tskhinvali region, the Joint Control Commission (JCC) for Georgian–Ossetian Conflict Resolution was created in 1992 to serve as a joint Georgian–Russian peacekeeping mission in the region. This mission was monitored by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Before the 2008 war Russian forces participating in peacekeeping operations in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region had areas of responsibility. It is these areas to which the Six Point Ceasefire plan required Russian forces to return. The Russian-led CIS peacekeeping force, the UNOMIG, the JCC, and the OSCE monitoring mission ended after the 2008 war and were replaced by an illegal Russian occupation force.

2) Russia must provide free access for humanitarian assistance.²⁶

Russia also uses so-called hybrid tactics in Georgia. The 2008 invasion was preceded by a sophisticated cyber attack.²⁷ Since the 2008 war Russia has used propaganda, funded nongovernmental organizations, and employed Russian-language TV channels to advance a pro-Russia/anti-West narrative in Georgia.²⁸

Since 2008, the Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia essentially have become large Russian military bases. Thousands of Russian troops are stationed in both regions. Advanced military hardware including armored vehicles, tanks, anti-aircraft batteries, and tactical ballistic missiles are stationed in both the Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia.²⁹ Since Georgia's capital is only 30 miles away from Tskhinvali, all of this is within striking distance of Tbilisi.

The Russian militarization of the Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia is beyond the reach and sight of the European Union Monitoring Mission, established soon after the war to monitor the cease-fire agreement, because Russian authorities prevent it from entering the occupied regions. Even so, in some cases the construction of Russian military facilities can be seen with the naked eye from the Georgian-controlled side of the occupation line.³⁰

Soon after the war in 2008, Russia unilaterally recognized the independence of the two occupied regions. Since then an international drive led by Russia for recognition of the "Republic of South Ossetia" and "Republic of Abkhazia" has been a dismal failure. Out of 193 countries in the United Nations, only four recognize the independence of these illegitimate republics: Russia, Nicaragua, Nauru, and Venezuela. It is worth pointing out that Nauru formally recognized the breakaway regions only after Russia provided it with \$50 million in aid in 2009.³¹ In November 2017 the president of Nauru even visited Abkhazia in what the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs described as "a blatant violation of international law."³²

In the same way that Russia is failing at gaining international recognition of the two breakaway regions, Georgia is having difficulties convincing its Western European allies, even the United Kingdom, to formally recognize Russia's military presence on its land as an "occupation."

²⁶Civil Georgia, "Six-Point Ceasefire Plan," August 20, 2008, <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=19478> (accessed December 29, 2017).

²⁷John Markoff, "Before the Gunfire, Cyberattacks," *The New York Times*, August 12, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/13/technology/13cyber.html> (accessed December 29, 2017).

²⁸Vasili Rukhadze, "Russia's Soft Power in Georgia: How Does It Work?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 13, No. 34 (February 19, 2016), <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-soft-power-in-georgia-how-does-it-work/> (accessed December 29, 2017).

²⁹Giorgi Menabde, "Russian Army Again Threatening Georgia from the Occupied Territories," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 14, No. 84 (June 22, 2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-army-threatening-georgia-occupied-territories/> (accessed December 29 2017).

³⁰The author has seen this near the Georgian village of Odzisi.

³¹Luke Harding, "Tiny Nauru Struts World Stage by Recognising Breakaway Republics," *The Guardian*, December 14, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/dec/14/nauro-recognises-abkhazia-south-ossetia> (accessed December 29, 2017).

³²Gvantsa Gabekhadze, "Georgia Condemns Nauru President's Visit to Abkhazia," *The Messenger Online*, November 15, 2017, http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/4016_november_15_2017/4016_edit.html (accessed December 29 2017).

The two occupied regions depend wholly on Moscow for their security and economic well-being. The Line of Occupation³³ on the Russian side is patrolled by security officials from the Federal Security Service (commonly referred to as the FSB), which is the successor to the Soviet Union’s KGB.

Since 2011, FSB and separatist forces have implemented a policy of “borderization” in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. This includes constructing illegal fencing and earthen barriers to separate communities and further divide the Georgian population. Russian and Russian-backed forces have also installed “State Border” signs warning those on the Georgian side of the Line of

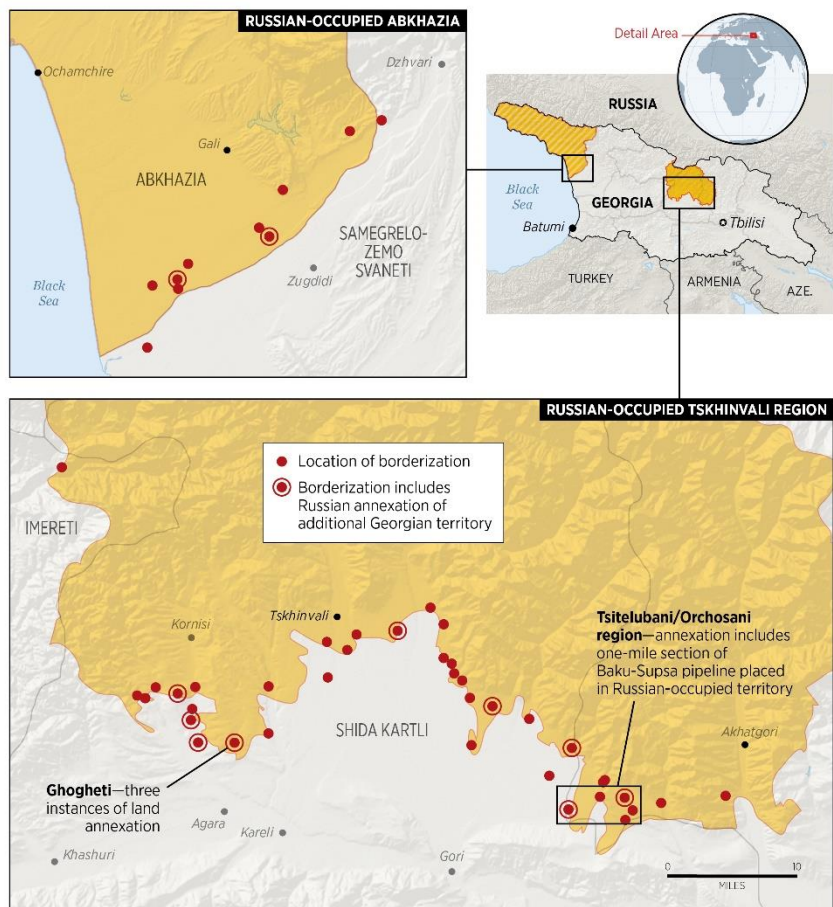
Occupation not to enter. In extreme cases Russia has taken even more territory, often yards at a time, in what has been described as Russia’s “creeping annexation.”³⁴ Research carried out by The Heritage Foundation has found 57 incidents at 44 different locations of Russian borderization in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region.

The most egregious example of borderization since the 2008 war took place in July and August 2015, when Russia annexed an additional 300 acres of Georgian territory. During this time Russia built a fence within 550 yards of Georgia’s E60 highway, which is the main road in the South Caucasus linking the Black Sea to Azerbaijan. A “State Border” sign installed by Russian authorities is also visible from the highway. This annexation placed a

MAP 2

Russian Instances of Borderization in Georgia

Since 2011, there have been at least 56 instances of borderization—including surveillance cameras, illegal fences, and other barriers—across 48 locations in Georgia by Russian forces. Some of the instances include “creeping annexation” in which Russia has taken additional territory from Georgia.



NOTE: Locations of borderization incidents and boundaries of Russian-occupied territories are approximate. SOURCES: Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Heritage Foundation research.

SR199 heritage.org

³³Also known as the Administrative Border Line.

³⁴Roland Oliphant, “EU Condemns Russia over ‘Creeping Annexation’ of Georgia,” *The Telegraph*, July 16, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/georgia/11745510/EU-condemns-Russia-over-creeping-annexation-of-Georgia.html> (accessed December 29, 2017).

one-mile segment of the BP-operated Baku-Supsa pipeline inside Russian-occupied territory.³⁵

In 2015, Russia signed so-called integration treaties with the separatist authorities in the Tskhinvali region 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 ethnic Ossetians in the Tskhinvali region to receive Russian citizenship. The Georgian Foreign Ministry criticized the treaties as a step toward the “annexation of Georgia’s occupied territories.”³⁶ In March 2017, a measure was taken to fully integrate the armed forces of the separatist Tskhinvali region into the Russian military.³⁷

In April 2017, the separatist government in the Tskhinvali region held an illegal referendum to change the name of the breakaway republic from “Republic of South Ossetia” to “State of Alania.” This would bring the name closer in line with the Republic of North Ossetia–Alania, a Russian federal district in the North Caucasus.³⁸ This was the idea of the Ossetian separatist leader, Leonid Tibilov, who desires an eventual full integration with Russia’s North Ossetia.³⁹

Another concern for Georgia should be Russia’s increasing military presence in Armenia, and how Moscow might stoke sectarian divisions with the sizable ethnic Armenian minority located in the Georgian province of Samtskhe–Javakheti.

Moscow has a track record of taking advantage of ethnic divisions and tensions in the South Caucasus to advance pro-Russian policies that are often at odds with America’s or NATO’s goals in the region.

Russia maintains a sizable military presence in Armenia based on an agreement giving Moscow access to bases in that country for 49 years.⁴⁰ The bulk of Russia’s forces, consisting of approximately 5,000 soldiers and dozens of fighter planes and attack helicopters, are based

³⁵Margarita Antidze, “Georgia Says Russia Violating Sovereignty with Border Markers,” Reuters, July 13, 2015, <https://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKCN0PN1VK20150713> (accessed December 29, 2017).

³⁶Agenda.ge, “Russia-Abkhazia Treaty: ‘Step Towards Annexation of Georgian Region,’” November 22, 2014, <http://agenda.ge/news/24977/eng> (accessed December 29, 2017).

³⁷“Moscow Moves to Absorb Rebel Georgian Region’s Military,” Reuters, March 14, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-georgia-army/moscow-moves-to-absorb-rebel-georgian-regions-military-idUSKBN16L1XQ> (accessed December 29, 2017).

³⁸The Ossetian people are representative of the typical geographical, religious, and ethnic complexities found in the Caucasus. Ethnically and linguistically, they are descended from Iranians. Religiously, they are Orthodox Christian. The Ossetians are unique in the Caucasus, as they are the only ethnic group found living in large numbers on both sides of the mountains. Even so, the Ossetians living in the breakaway Tskhinvali region do not have as close links to Russia’s North Ossetia. The only road linking the two regions runs through the Roki tunnel which was only completed in 1984. In fact, Tskhinvali, the administrative capital of the breakaway Tskhinvali region, is closer to Tbilisi than it is to North Ossetia’s capital city of Vladikavkaz.

³⁹“South Ossetia Leaders Says Treaty Could Call for Joining Russia,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, December 11, 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tibilov-south-ossetia-russia-treaty-signing-georgia-abkhazia/26737140.html> (accessed December 29, 2017).

⁴⁰Andrew Osborn, “Russia to Beef Up Military Presence in Former Soviet Space,” *The Telegraph*, August 18, 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/7952433/Russia-to-beef-up-military-presence-in-former-Soviet-space.html> (accessed December 15, 2017).

around the 102nd Military Base.⁴¹ Also, Russia and Armenia signed a Combined Regional Air Defense System agreement and maintain some joint military units. Russia has had long difficulty supplying these forces, especially since a transit route which runs right through Georgian airspace has been closed and Turkey refuses transit. This has left reliance on Iran, which for obvious reasons is not ideal for Russia.

The Georgian province of Samtskhe–Javakheti is strategically important for a number of reasons. The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline and the South Caucasus Pipeline, carrying oil and gas, respectively, from the Caspian to the Mediterranean, pass through the province. The Kars–Tbilisi–Baku railway also runs through Samtskhe–Javakheti. As the possibility of increased Central Asian gas transiting to Europe becomes more likely, these pipelines could become vital for Europe. This is especially true at a time when many European countries are dependent on Russia for their energy resources.

Consequently, there is concern that Russia is exploiting ethnic tensions in the ethnic Armenian-populated Samtskhe–Javakheti in order to create a sphere of influence, linking Russia with Armenia through the Tskhinvali region and Samtskhe–Javakheti.

Causing instability or stoking separatist tendencies in Samtskhe–Javakheti would achieve two goals for Moscow. First, it would further dismember the territorial integrity of Georgia and continue to delay Georgia from fully integrating into euroatlantic organizations. With the Tskhinvali region already under Russian occupation, an independent Samtskhe–Javakheti, or one under Russian influence, would divide Georgia down the middle.

Second, and more important for Russia, bringing the region under Moscow’s influence would make a land corridor between Russia and Armenia via the Tskhinvali region one step closer to being a reality.

Armenian separatism in Samtskhe–Javakheti might not be as vocal as it was only a few years ago, but there is still a fear that Moscow could easily re-energize separatist movements in the region. In 2010 Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, himself half-Armenian, publicly criticized Georgia’s alleged mistreatment of ethnic minorities, including Armenians.⁴²

Many Javakheti Armenians have Russian sympathies. For example, a large number of Javakheti Armenians hold Armenian passports, making it easier to find seasonal work in Armenia and Russia.⁴³ (Since the Russian ruble has lost much of its value due to economic sanctions, remittances have also decreased, adding to the already existing economic problems). Until its closure in 2007, the Russian military base there was the single largest source of employment. There is also a concern by many ethnic Armenians about a decrease in the quality of education among the Javakheti Armenian population because there are not

⁴¹Nikolai Litovkin, “Russia and Armenia to Create Joint Defense Force in Caucasus,” United Press International, November 16, 2016, <http://www.upi.com/Russia-and-Armenia-to-create-joint-defense-force-in-Caucasus/1461479301074/> (accessed December 15, 2017).

⁴²Vladimir Socor, “Lavrov Hints at Fomenting Ethnic Tensions Inside Georgia,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 7, No. 132 (July 9, 2010), <https://jamestown.org/program/lavrov-hints-at-fomenting-ethnic-tensions-inside-georgia/> (accessed December 29, 2017).

⁴³Maia Ivelashvili, “Georgia’s Armenians in Voting Row,” Institute for War & Peace Reporting, CRS No. 640, May 11, 2012, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/georgias-armenians-voting-row>.

enough qualified teachers with proficiency in both Georgian and Armenian.⁴⁴ Part of this problem is the unwillingness of the ethnic Armenian population to learn Georgian.

In September 2017, there was a clash between the Georgian police and ethnic Armenians in the Samtskhe–Javakheti village of Kumurdo. The dispute was over whether renovations being undertaken at the village’s 10th-century church disregarded the bodily remains of Armenians buried in the church yard.⁴⁵

Clearly, under the right circumstances Russia could exploit local and sectarian divisions and stir up unrest with Georgia’s Armenian minority to further advance its own agenda in the South Caucasus.

Deepening the Relationship

Georgians have proven themselves reliable U.S. allies and gallant in combat. They are also undertaking a defense transformation program and investing in their military in a way far exceeding NATO’s standard. The Georgian population has shown a commitment to the transatlantic community and more enthusiasm for NATO than most of the Alliance’s current members.

The year 2018 offers the U.S. an opportunity to deepen its relationship with Tbilisi, reaffirm NATO’s commitment to Georgian membership, strengthen the NATO–Georgian relationship, boost Georgia’s NATO integration process, and enhance Georgia’s defensive capabilities. In the long run, this would bring more stability to the South Caucasus and Black Sea regions, which is in America’s national interest.

In order to advance U.S. interests in the South Caucasus and Black Sea regions and deepen the bilateral relationship with Georgia, the U.S. should:

- **Keep up a visible political presence in Georgia.** Vice President Pence’s visit last summer was a great first step. This visit should be followed by a presidential visit and regular Cabinet-level visits to deepen cooperation in diplomatic, economic, defense, cultural, and energy fields.
- **Push Russia to live up to the commitments in the 2008 Six Point Ceasefire Agreement.** It is utterly unacceptable that almost 10 years later Russia still does not fully abide by the cease-fire agreement. The U.S. should work with allies to pressure Russia to allow international monitors and humanitarian aid into the occupied regions, and to pull back Russian forces to their pre-August 2008 locations.
- **Supply anti-aircraft and air defense weapons to Georgia.** Every country has the right to self-defense. While the decision to provide anti-tank weapons is welcome and a good first step, more can be done to enhance the defensive capabilities of Georgia. This includes helping Georgia defend its airspace and territory from hostile planes and missiles.
- **Encourage, where possible, countries to refuse recognition of independence of the two Russian-occupied regions of Georgia.** Countries siding with Russia should be strongly

⁴⁴Inga Popovaite, “Armenians in Akhalkalaki Struggle to Learn Georgian,” *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, December 26, 2014,

<http://dfwatch.net/armenians-in-akhalkalaki-struggle-to-learn-georgian-18393-32827> (accessed March 15, 2017).

⁴⁵Giorgi Menabde, “Who Provoked the Clashes Between Local Armenians and the Georgian Police?” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 14, No. 129 (October 13, 2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/provoked-clashes-local-armenians-georgian-police/> (accessed December 29, 2017).

encouraged to change their policy to coincide with mainstream international opinion and recognize the Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia as part of Georgia's territory. In particular the U.S. has leverage it can use with Nicaragua (millions of dollars in aid money) and Nauru (the expanded ship-rider agreement as part of the Oceania Maritime Security Initiative) to encourage a change in policy.⁴⁶

- **Push for Georgia's speedy membership in NATO by temporarily amending Article 6 of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty.** Many are worried that Georgia's NATO membership will mean automatic war with Russia over the occupied regions. Georgia can be invited to join NATO by amending Article 6 of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty (which defines which territories fall under the Article 5 protection) to *temporarily* exclude the Russian-occupied Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia from Article 5 protection. This amendment can be made with Georgia's accession protocol as it was in 1951 when Turkey and Greece joined the Alliance. It is important to point out that 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. Allowing Georgia to join NATO with an amended Article 6 is also consistent with Georgia's non-use-of-force pledge regarding regaining control of the occupied regions. This would allow Georgia to join NATO more quickly and would deny Moscow's de facto veto on countries under partial Russian occupation that want to join the Alliance.
- **Develop a strategy for the Black Sea region.** The Black Sea sits at an important crossroads among Europe, Asia, and the Caucasus. Since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, the Black Sea has essentially become a Russian lake. This is a direct threat to U.S., NATO, and Georgian security interests. Many of the recent initiatives at the NATO level have not met expectations. The U.S. should be a leader inside the Alliance to develop meaningful ways to work with the Black Sea littoral states to develop a strategy for regional security.
- **Work with NATO to open a NATO-certified Center of Excellence on Black Sea Security in Georgia.** There is no precedent for a NATO-certified Center of Excellence in a non-NATO country; but establishing one could improve NATO–Georgia relations and show how important the Black Sea region has become for Europe's overall security. The Center of Excellence would provide an opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue and training in how to address the challenges associated with Black Sea security.
- **Work with NATO to establish a Black Sea Maritime Patrol mission modeled off the Baltic Air Policing mission.** NATO's interest in Black Sea security is increasing, but the overall presence of non–Black Sea NATO warships is decreasing. NATO should establish a Black Sea Maritime Patrol mission modeled on the successful Baltic Air Policing mission, in order to maintain a robust NATO presence in the Black Sea in line with the 1936 Montreux Convention. This would require non–Black Sea NATO countries to commit in advance to a regular and rotational maritime presence in the Black Sea.
- **Invite Georgia to contribute troops to the U.S.-led multinational battalion in Poland as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence.** Georgians are always looking for new ways to contribute to transatlantic security and the U.S. and Georgia have a strong track record serving alongside each other. The U.S. should invite Georgia to contribute to its multinational battalion in Poland. To date, no non-NATO ally has contributed troops as part

⁴⁶The Oceania Maritime Security Initiative provides security and supports ship-rider missions, which allow Nauruan law enforcement officials to ride aboard U.S. Navy and U.S. Coast Guard vessels.

of the Enhanced Forward Presence initiative, but if Georgian troops are able to serve in the NATO Response Force they should also be able to serve as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence.

- **Focus NATO's Centers of Excellence on the security situation in Georgia and the South Caucasus.** NATO should encourage NATO's Centers of Excellence to assist Georgia in facing Russian aggression, especially at the centers focusing on cyberspace (Estonia), energy security (Lithuania), and countering propaganda (Latvia). Even as an aspirant country the Alliance should consider inviting Georgia to become a Contributing Participant in each of these three centers.
- **Push NATO to refer to the Russian military presence as an occupation.** NATO should call the presence of several thousand Russian troops in the Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia what it is: an occupation. To date, many European countries have failed to use this terminology. Given recent events in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, it is more important than ever that NATO send a united and clear message.
- **Make it clear that a Membership Action Plan is not required for NATO membership.** It is a common misconception that a MAP is a requirement for joining the Alliance, and the U.S. should use the upcoming summit to clear up any confusion on this matter. 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 Substantial NATO–Georgia Package (SNGP) is fully resourced.** While the SNGP has done a lot to improve the capabilities of the Georgian Armed Forces, full implementation of the package has been slow and incomplete. NATO should ensure that the resources are dedicated to fulfill the complete package in a timely manner.
- **Agree to a package of conditional economic sanctions that will trigger automatically if either Abkhazia or the Tskhinvali region is annexed by Russia.** The U.S. should make it very clear to Russia that annexation of either of the breakaway regions 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 possibility.
- **Offer political support for the Southern Gas Corridor project.** As Europe seeks alternatives to Russian gas, the Southern Gas Corridor, which in part will run through Georgia and the Balkans, will play an important role. The U.S. should offer political support to this project in the same way it did to the construction of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan Pipeline in the 1990s.
- **Push for a free trade agreement with Georgia.** While the Georgian economy is relatively small, a U.S.–Georgia free trade agreement would have a geopolitical impact. It would send a message to the region, friend and foe alike, that the U.S. is a key player and serious about deepening relations with a deserving country like Georgia.

A Great Opportunity

The year 2018 offers many opportunities for deepening the U.S.–Georgian relationship while helping Georgia on the path to NATO membership. 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 that of many NATO members.

The U.S. must be a leader within NATO to push for a united voice condemning Russian aggression against Georgia, reiterating the need for a complete restoration of Georgia’s territorial integrity. The Trump Administration and the U.S. Congress should not hesitate to provide military and political support for Georgia. The U.S. should seize the opportunity to quickly and robustly reaffirm American commitment and support for the people of Georgia in 2018. This will make both America and her allies safer.

Thank you Mr. Chairman and Members of the Commission.

I look forward to answering your questions.

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