

NATO and Georgian–American Military Relations

Eugene Kogan

Since the 2003 Rose Revolution, Georgia has become a staunch and dependable non-NATO ally of the United States in the South Caucasus. Georgian-American bilateral military relations have become stronger and have climaxed in November 2017.

With 870 soldiers per capita, Georgia is the leading donor of troops in Afghanistan. This is highly appreciated by the United States. James Mattis, US Secretary of Defense, said on 13 November 2017: "Georgia is a role model for all" NATO

training the Georgian military for the Afghanistan mission and began training the Georgian military for the territorial defence of Georgia in May 2018. Georgia's acquisition of JAVELIN portable anti-tank systems in January 2018 was indeed a milestone

US Financial Support to Georgia

American military assistance to Georgia, designated the FMF and intended for military equipment, fell from US\$30M in 2016 to just US\$20M in 2017, with funding in 2017 aimed at "promoting the development of Georgian forces capable of enhancing security, countering Russian aggression and contributing to coalition operations". This also includes support for the modernisation of Georgian rotorcraft air transport capacities, Georgian military institutions and defence reform. A spending law passed by the Senate Administrative Committee in September 2017 increased Georgia's FMF from US\$20M in 2017 to US\$35M in 2018. And we can expect a further increase for 2019, although the official FMF data have not yet been published.

A Turn in the US Military Approach

In recent years, the US military approach to Georgia has shifted – from training for international missions to the territorial defence of Georgia. The latest US-Georgia "Memorandum on Enhancing the Defence and Security Partnership", signed in Tbilisi on 6 July 2016 by US Secretary of State John Kerry and Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili provided for this shift of US military assistance to Georgia from training Georgian soldiers for international deployment to the territorial defence of Georgia. In addition, the memorandum provides for assistance in defence procurement for Georgia in order to enhance the country's defence capabilities and the combat level of its armed forces so that they can cooperate with NATO forces. The initiative focuses on modernising Vaziani military base outside Tbilisi in order to better deploy Georgian forces in combined



Photo: U.S.M.C.

The US holds two major military exercises annually on Vaziani military base – Agile Spirit and Noble Partner. Depicted are Georgian, US and Azerbaijani troops during the opening ceremony for Exercise Agile Spirit in Orpholo, Georgia, 3 September 2017.

member states deploying forces in Afghanistan. And the United States responds accordingly, not only with regard to foreign military funding (FMF), but also with regard to the annual US-led military exercises in Georgia (codenamed Agile Spirit and Noble Partner). In addition, US instructors are

in relations between Georgia and the US. Up until then, the US did not deliver defensive weapons to Georgia. This development has consolidated bilateral relations, taking them to a new level. Finally, with the pending Georgia Support Act (GSA), introduced on 26 June 2018 by the Congressmen Ted Poe and Gerald Connolly, the US provides robust support for Georgian sovereignty, although it does not provide details of emergency assistance to Georgia in the event of a Russian invasion. In other words, in a conflict with Russia, Georgia has to defend itself on its own.

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arms operations or to improve cooperation between ground troops and air support. For example, during the 2016 Noble Partner Exercise Georgia commanded joint Georgia/USA/UK air and land forces for the first time.

The US does some combined arms training of Georgian troops, but it does so at the US-operated Joint Multinational Readiness Centre at Hohenfels Training Area, Germany. The establishment of the US-financed Joint Multinational Readiness Centre (JMRC) in Georgia, similar to the centre of the same name at the US site in Germany, is a step in the right direction. The US-Georgia JMRC is located at Vaziani military base and has been in operation since May 2018.

Under the Georgian Defence Readiness Programme (GDRP) launched at the JMRC, between 40 and 50 American army officers are stationed at Vaziani base to train Georgian troops. The programme was launched in May 2018; it has a duration of three years and trains nine NATO standard rifle battalions. This complements Georgia's operational programme, under which some 80 US Marines are stationed in Georgia to train Georgian troops before they are being sent to NATO's Resolute Support Mission (RSM) in Afghanistan.

In addition to training, the United States has finally approved the supply of defensive weapons to Georgia. Currently, the US holds two major military exercises annually on Vaziani military base – "Agile Spirit" and "Noble Partner", a point which has repeatedly drawn criticism from Grigori Karasin, Russia's Deputy Secretary of State. Karasin said in February 2019, "NATO's agenda is becoming more and more visible in Georgian foreign policy. They quite often hold large NATO military exercises, and Georgia is getting involved in other countries in the region, such as Armenia. Georgian politicians speak of an accelerated NATO membership strategy and an alleged Russian threat to democratic Europe". The military exercises have become a real irritant in Russian-Georgian relations.

Georgian Procurement of US Defensive Weapons

The US Defence Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) announced on 20 November 2017 that "the State Department has approved a possible Foreign Military Sale of JAVELIN missiles and command launchers to Georgia for an estimated cost of US\$75M". In January 2018, the sale was approved.

DSCA specified that arms sales would include 410 JAVELIN missiles and 72 JAVELIN Command Launch Units as well as logis-



Thirteen nations participate in the annual Noble Partner exercise. Agile Spirit and Noble Partner are multilateral training exercises designed to promote unit cohesion and interoperability between the United States, Georgia, and other NATO and partner nations.

tics and programme support elements. According to DSCA, the proposed sale "would contribute to the foreign policy and national security of the United States by enhancing the security of Georgia. The JAVELIN launcher system will improve Georgia's capability to meet its national

defence needs." DSCA also noted that the sale "would not alter the military balance in the region" and that "there would be no negative impact on US defence as a result of this planned sale". What is important in the DSCA Declaration is the explicit link between the foreign policy and national

Infographic: Josh Wick, US Army Europe Public Affairs

Photo: US Army / LANDCOM Public Affairs



The logo for the NATO-Georgia Exercise at the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Centre in Krtsanisi National Training Centre

security of the United States and the enhanced security of Georgia. It underlines Georgia's importance for US foreign and security policy and underlines the American understanding that such a limited sale of defence systems to Georgia would not be a turning point. At the same time, the US signalled to Russia that it was willing to supply defensive weapons to Georgia, a signal which was perceived in Moscow. The sale of JAVELIN anti-tank missiles is therefore a milestone in relations between Georgia and the USA. Until the announcement of the DSCA, the US Government hesitated to sell defensive weapons to Georgia, because Georgia was not seen

as a responsible actor on the international stage and in order not to aggravate the unsafe relations between the US and Russia and because of an unofficial arms embargo against Georgia after the war of August 2008. Undoubtedly, the illegal Russian annexation of the Crimea in March 2014 was an additional factor that prompted the US Government to reconsider and eventually sell JAVELINs to Georgia. Whether the US will sell more JAVELINs or not remains to be seen. However, such a sale is no longer completely unlikely. The Trump government has revitalised military relations between Georgia and the US, which had been neglected by the Obama administra-

Photo: US Army



At Vaziani Training Area, a platoon of Georgian Army BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles firing during a combined arms live fire exercise with US troops. The exercise was part of Noble Partner 18.

tion. Furthermore, in 2017, the US began replacing Soviet AK rifles in the Georgian Army with American M240 machine guns. Besides JAVELIN missiles and M240 guns, Mamuka Bakhtadze, Prime Minister of Georgia, said in October 2018, "American specialists are ready to upgrade US helicopters donated to Georgia." Already in 2001, the USA donated 10 Bell UH-1 IROQUOIS helicopters to Georgia. One of the helicopters was lost; two are still in use, and seven more are to be retrofitted. It is still undecided whether the USA will donate more of the Bell UH-1 helicopters to Georgia.

Vaziani Military Airfield

Last but not least, in November 2018 Levan Izoria, Georgian Minister of Defence, welcomed General Stephen Lyons, Commander of the United States Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM). The talks focused on expanding the capabilities of Vaziani military airfield. Izoria said: "We want to strengthen ongoing cooperation and implement the initiative we have presented to the NATO Georgia Commission (NGC) to implement the Georgian Defence Readiness Programme. To this end, we need adequate infrastructure capacity and a key component is Vaziani military airfield".

The Russian newspaper "Voenno-Promyshlennyi Kurier" reported that Vaziani Airbase, which in Soviet times housed a Soviet military airbase, might once again become a military airfield, but this time an American one. The Russian newspaper "Kommersant" further stated that Georgia and the US had agreed to build a large NATO military logistical hub on the basis of the existing Vaziani airport. After modernising the runway, American HERCULES transport planes would be able to touch down in Vaziani. The modernised airfield would be used for deploying NATO troops for military exercises in Georgia, but it could also be used to deploy troops in the event of an escalation in Georgia. It is not yet known when construction will begin and how high the costs will be.

However, it is premature to consider modernising Vaziani Airport and upgrading it from Vaziani to a large NATO military logistical hub as a sign of a fully-fledged US military base in Georgia. What is happening at the moment, however, is indeed a first step in this direction.

However, it is important to consider the Russian perspective. President Vladimir Putin and his military advisers are likely to react militarily if the proposed plan is implemented. They regard Georgia as their zone of influence and are not prepared to hand Georgia over to the Americans. The

US military planners should take this point into account, as the implementation of the above plan would give Putin and his military advisers a licence to invade Georgia to take over or destroy the US military facilities and expel American and NATO instructors from Georgia. Such a scenario is not far-fetched. We must remember the famous SAS motto "He who dares wins", and Russia's recent military invasions of Crimea and Syria clearly show that President Vladimir Putin's government is not afraid of unknown dangers and is ready to respond to its well-prepared plans. It should be stressed that Russia's soft security policy is supported by the robust military arm, a fact that the US military should be aware of, along with Russia's willingness to invade other countries.

According to US estimates, the war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008 led to the destruction or loss of around US\$30M in donated materials and equipment. Next time, costs are likely to be higher.

In addition to military support, the US has been providing support for the Georgian Coast Guard since the end of the 1990s. The Georgian Coast Guard, which reports to the Ministry of the Interior, was merged

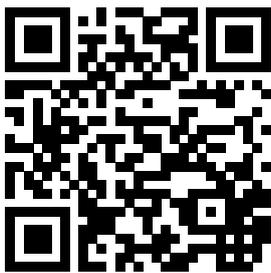
with the Georgian Navy in 2009. On 30 September 2016, the US donated two IS-LAND class patrol boats to the Georgian Coast Guard. The Georgian crews were trained for 10 weeks by the US Coast Guard in Baltimore, Maryland. Since the August 2008 war, the US has financed four radar stations for the Georgian Coast Guard – in Gonio, Anaklia, Supsa and Chakvi. The two previous radar stations were destroyed in August 2008. The US also financed a maritime fusion centre in Supsa and a ship repair facility in Poti, which were opened in 2014 and 2013 respectively. Finally, in September 2015, a new Coast Guard boat pool was inaugurated in Batumi, built with US\$14M from US funds.

There is no doubt that US support for the Georgian military is a source of hope for Georgia's possible accession to NATO. Georgia's ability to provide a relatively large number of well-equipped and well-trained troops in the event of a national emergency will demonstrate to the NATO Alliance that Georgia is a vital partner. A country able to defend its interests with or without the Alliance is worth NATO membership, even if some NATO members are not yet convinced of Georgia's value and follow their natural instincts not to obstruct Russia.

Conclusion

Georgia's military involvement in the US missions in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated the determination of a small country to be at the forefront of US combat operations. The 32 Georgian soldiers who died in Afghanistan in the last 10 years were seen by the US military as brothers in arms, and their deaths strengthened the link between the militaries of both countries. It is for good reason that Congressman Ted Poe said on 26 June 2018: "The friendship between our two nations has been forged in blood, with Georgian troops fighting and dying alongside American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan." The abovementioned initiatives show that a viable Georgia is crucial for the United States and its strategic planning in the Black Sea region. Georgia's military progress since the August 2008 war should encourage wavering NATO members to reconsider their stance on Georgia's NATO membership. The official NATO approach "More NATO in Georgia and more Georgia in NATO" is no longer sufficient and will certainly not bring Georgia any closer to full NATO membership. This is something of which Russia is very well aware, and the danger of a Russian invasion is indeed lurking around the corner. ■

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