

How Strategic is the US-Georgia Strategic Partnership?

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In January 2009, the outgoing administration of George W. Bush bequeathed to its successor a document that aspired to institutionalize the increasingly complicated U.S.-Georgian relationship, a relationship that, many assume, contributed to the outbreak of war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008. The “U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership” is not a unique document—it borrows heavily from the “U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership” signed a month before. In turn, both charters were inspired by previous documents formalizing pre-NATO relationships with Baltic and Western Balkan states. For that matter, strategic partnerships with the United States are ubiquitous on every continent.

What, then, is the significance of the U.S.-Georgian partnership? Certainly, it is impossible to separate the new strategic partnership from either the context of the United States’ longstanding relationship with Georgia, the Russian-Georgian war and its aftermath, or the Obama administration’s efforts to put US-Russian relations on a new footing. It is also difficult to discern whether the strategic partnership is a way station to Georgia’s promised integration into NATO, a consolation prize for failing to move institutionally forward toward NATO membership, or a way to forestall all further discussion on the subject. A comparative glance reinforces the notion that these kind of partnerships have no single endpoint—although in Eastern Europe most partnerships have ultimately led to NATO.

Relatedly, the strategic partnership is ambiguous regarding the best way forward in promoting two of its goals: support for Georgia’s “legitimate security and defense needs” and regional “peace and stability.” After a period of early uncertainty, the Obama administration has in practice found itself in alignment with Russian requests not to permit even the defensive

rearmament of Georgia, while focusing on continued military training and support for a beefed-up Georgian deployment to Afghanistan (Georgia has also been a significant contributor to coalition forces in Iraq). Whether this is a long-term equilibrium that can help to achieve simultaneous goals of the partnership remains to be seen.

One way the partnership does explicitly seek to promote the goals of Georgian security and defense needs and regional stability is through renewed attention to Georgian democratization, which has failed to live up to the expectations of the 2003 Rose Revolution. At the core of the partnership is a recognition that Georgian democratization has, in several areas, stalled entirely (and, in some cases, possibly even reversed) and that there is a need to promote a balanced distribution of state powers, transparency of governance, independent media, and effective civil society organizations. These requirements are deemed necessary for Georgia's own benefit, for the promotion of regional "peace and stability," and, in the end, as justification for the strategic partnership itself. Left unsaid is what the explicit benchmarks are to gauge success, and what will happen if further efforts to promote democratization fail.

The partnership also supports another approach for aligning Georgia's security and defense needs with regional peace and stability: supporting Georgia's wide-ranging engagement with the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia prior to addressing issues of final status. Largely an outcome contingent on Georgian and Russian (and, to a certain extent, Abkhazian and South Ossetian) political will, such "pre-status" engagement has been officially embraced as Georgian state doctrine. It is unlikely to succeed, however, without the sustained support and attention of Georgia's external partners. Fostering contact across dividing lines is a stated goal of the U.S.-Georgian strategic partnership, so there are grounds to believe that the

United States will be willing to lend support to this process, through financial assistance and at the level of its ongoing dialogue with Russia.

The US-Georgia Strategic Partnership in Context

These days, strategic partnerships with the United States may be found across the globe. In 2009 alone, U.S. diplomats or their counterparts from at least 17 states made reference to bilateral strategic partnerships. Some of these partnerships are outgrowths of deep institutional or historical alliances: NATO members Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey, as well as longtime “major non-NATO allies” (MNNAs) Israel and Australia, all referenced their strategic partnerships with the United States. So, too, did Egypt, another of the United States’ 14 MNNAs. Most other contemporary strategic partnerships emerge from today’s headlines: Afghanistan, Pakistan (another MNNA), India, and, more recently, Brazil and Indonesia. It may come as a surprise that the United States speaks of its strategic partnership with the United Arab Emirates and even Angola, with which it concluded a “strategic partnership dialogue” in November 2009. In post-Soviet Eurasia, Georgia is joined by Ukraine and, at least aspirationally, Azerbaijan. (Incidentally, the United States is only moving “toward” strategic partnership with Mexico).

The fact that Georgia is in the company of so many states suggests that the notion of a strategic partnership is really not very significant. Yet, once allies and other states at the center of U.S. foreign policy are accounted for, strategic partnerships appear relatively rare. If strategic partnership with the United States is at all a desired good, then countries like Angola, the UAE, and Georgia are indeed a privileged bunch.

That said, given the pathway into the NATO alliance that most of Georgia’s Eastern European neighbors have taken, Georgia’s strategic partnership is generally assessed less on its

comparative global value and more on its ability to nudge the country into NATO or another alliance relationship with the United States. There are certainly precedents for such “partnerships” to turn into alliances. In 1998, four years before the Baltic states were invited to join NATO, they were signatories of a “Charter of Partnership” with the United States, which addressed similar issues to those outlined in the U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership. The United States concluded an “Adriatic” Charter of Partnership with the Western Balkan states of Albania, Croatia, and Macedonia in 2003, five years before these three states were invited into NATO (in the case of the latter, pending resolution of its name dispute with Greece). In 2008, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina also signed onto the Adriatic Charter, with the former receiving a NATO Membership Action Plan at the end of 2009, making it the only remaining state besides Macedonia with such a status. Bosnia continues to stand in line for a MAP, with staunch American support. Following in the footsteps of all these regional U.S. “partners,” Georgia’s future as a member of the Euro-Atlantic alliance might yet seem bright, no matter how discouraging the current context.

Comparing the text of these early Eastern European charters with Georgia’s provides some basis for additional optimism. The Baltic charter actually reads as even more of a consolation prize than a waystation in the aftermath of the failure to grant the Baltic states an invitation to NATO membership in 1997 with Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. While the Charter “welcom[ed] the aspirations and support[ed] the efforts” of the Baltic states to join NATO, it also observed that the alliance’s own “strategic interests” and the impact of enlargement on “European stability” would dictate membership prospects as much as the aspirations and capabilities of prospective Baltic allies. Compared to this language, the Georgian charter is downright committal, noting both NATO’s “affirmation...that Georgia will become a

member of NATO” and the signatories’ “shared goal” of Georgia’s “full integration...into European and transatlantic political, economic, security, and defense institutions.”

Other comparisons, however, are less favorable. The Baltic charter ponderously noted the “real, profound, and enduring interest” of the United States in the “independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, and security” of the three Baltic states. The Adriatic charter less dramatically noted only an “enduring” U.S. interest in Adriatic security, but also a “profound dedication” to its partners’ Euro-Atlantic integration. It also replaced as criteria for membership the alliance’s strategic interests and impact on European stability with prospective Balkan members’ “willingness to defend the democratic values protected by the Alliance.” In contrast, the Georgian charter conspicuously fails to mention any U.S. interest in Georgian security, profound, enduring, or otherwise, although it notes the “vital interest” that both partners share in a “strong, independent, sovereign, unified, and democratic Georgia.”

Such language play underlines a practical contrast between the alliance-presaging Baltic and Adriatic partnership and Georgia’s own. While the former did not imply any kind of security guarantees prior to NATO membership, it did encompass at least promises of consultation “in the event that a Partner perceives that its territorial integrity, independence, or security is threatened or at risk.” This promise, like the language on security, is absent from the US-Georgia charter.

Another difference is that the Georgian charter does not represent any kind of *regional* strategic partnership. It is a partnership with Georgia, not the Caucasus, and is thus more vulnerable to the vagaries of bilateral relations. One only has to ponder the United States’ similar strategic partnership with Ukraine. Uncertainty regarding Ukraine’s foreign policy trajectory and its ultimate foreign policy orientation has highlighted the vulnerability of such

bilateral charters. If one needed more evidence, we might recall the fate of the United States' strategic partnership with Uzbekistan, which faded dramatically once the relationship went sour. A regional strategy might have a greater chance of surviving shifts in foreign policy and priorities brought about by changes in government and state behavior.

Defense and Security Cooperation in the Wake of the August War

The strategic partnerships of the United States with Ukraine and Georgia, at least on the basis of their charters, are quite similar. They also share certain attributes with the earlier Baltic and Adriatic partnerships. Still, each of the charters – and the strategic partnership it underscores – derives from its own particular context. Two aspects of the U.S.-Georgian strategic partnership stand out.

First, the strategic partnership caps a long developing and multifaceted U.S. engagement with Georgia in spheres of economic aid and development, military assistance and partnership, and democracy promotion. This is an engagement that steadily developed from the mid-1990s, expanded after September 11, was boosted by the Rose Revolution after hints of disengagement in the waning years of former Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze, and hit a new high (at least in the first and third spheres) after Georgia's war with Russia. The U.S.-Georgian state-to-state relationship, on the level of practical bureaucratic engagement, has been one of the strongest in the post-Soviet space, a phenomenon that has spanned change in both U.S. and Georgian administrations. While codifying various elements of this long-developing U.S.-Georgian relationship, the strategic partnership promises some new elements: an "enhanced" bilateral investment treaty (the current one dates from the mid-1990s), a liberalized visa regime, and even possibly a free trade treaty.

Second, and more delicately, the strategic partnership takes as its point of departure Georgia's unique security context: the absence of an institutionalized pathway toward its promised NATO membership coupled with the clear and present security threat of Russian military occupation and unilateral recognition of independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. On the one hand, the US-Georgian strategic partnership appears to serve a similar function as the Baltic and Adriatic partnerships before it, as a consolation prize for not receiving a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP). Together with the NATO-Georgia Commission established some months before, it provides for a kind of "MAP-lite" that seeks to heighten Georgian readiness and capacity to integrate its forces into NATO. The strategic partnership also encompasses U.S. support for Georgia's efforts "to provide for its legitimate security and defense needs."

Thanks to the August war and the Obama administration's "reset" in U.S.-Russian relations, however, this last clause has turned out to be both contentious and a significant sticking point in U.S.-Georgian relations. U.S. support for Georgia's "legitimate security and defense needs" is consistent with a range of statements made by U.S. defense officials in the first months of the Obama administration. In February 2009, the Commander of US Army Europe, General Carter Ham, observed that the Georgian military planning had taken a fundamental shift in direction toward "territorial defense" and European Command and the Department of Defense were "trying to sort out how can we best help them in that regard." The next month in Tbilisi, vice-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General James Cartwright went further, noting that military training would be "focused on the defense of Georgia, on...internal defense."

From last summer, however, the Obama administration walked back from these early statements. In particular, the administration has to date refrained from approving commercial,

even defensive (anti-tank and anti-aircraft), arms sales to Georgia. What the chief considerations for this pause are have not been specified, although the decision is probably overdetermined, given Russia's intention to sanction actors who sell arms to Georgia; doubts as to such weaponry's actual deterrent effect; and uncertainty as to whether Georgia itself would refrain from attempting smaller-scale military offensives if sheltered by powerful defensive weapons systems. Assistant secretary of defense Alexander Vershbow summed up U.S. military assistance policy to Georgia (including, presumably, regulation of direct commercial weapons sales) in August 2009 as driven primarily by a concern that it not be "counterproductive to our goals of promoting peace and stability in the region." In practice, then, these goals have overruled that facet of the strategic partnership which supports Georgian efforts to provide for its "legitimate" security and defense needs. Either that, or the United States has taken on the task of redefining those needs.

Whatever the motivations, the decision that has resulted has made Georgians wonder exactly what kind of strategic partnership they have been granted—especially when the United States' NATO ally France prepares for an unprecedented sale to Russia of a warship that, Russian naval commander-in-chief Vladimir Vysotsky has observed, would have enabled the Black Sea Fleet "to accomplish its mission [in the August 2008 war] in 40 minutes, not 26 hours."

One commonly heard counter-proposition to the notion of an informal U.S. "arms embargo" against Georgia is that the United States is providing training to Georgian forces in preparation for deployment to Afghanistan, a deployment Special Representative Richard Holbrooke recently stressed was an "extremely important" one that "has gotten far too little attention." Such training, however, is less about Georgia's own security and defense needs than

about out-of-area coalition operations and Georgia's own willingness to take on a significant role in Afghanistan. In fact, US officials have gone out of their way to emphasize how little of significance for territorial defense there is in Georgia's participation in Afghanistan operations, noting that U.S. training is "not about internal defenses," should not be "perceived incorrectly as supplying lethal capabilities," and, flatly, that "no weapons will be provided."

Still, the United States wields the strategic partnership with Georgia as evidence that while it may have concerns about Georgia's own escalation of force in the August war, and while it is unable to rollback Russian advances in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, it is not forsaking its friend and partner in the face of Russian military occupation and strongly opposes any further changes to the status quo. In February, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton emphasized to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations that Georgia "remains a high priority to this Administration," underlining that the United States has conveyed "a very clear message" that "we are supporting the Government of Georgia" (not just the country, that is, but even its current government, deemed persona non grata by Russia). The U.S. reputation in the region still matters; it does not want to be seen as failing to stand up for vulnerable and insecure partners in Russia's neighborhood.

Democracy as a Foundation of the Strategic Partnership

One theme in particular sets apart the US-Georgian charter on strategic partnership: the role of democratization not only as a central pillar of the strategic partnership but also as its very justification. Concern about Georgia's stalled path to democracy, and even rollback of past democratic accomplishments, went from being a minority sentiment among observers in the

aftermath of the Rose Revolution to virtually a consensus view in the wake of the government's November 2007 crackdown on protestors, flawed electoral processes in 2008, and, finally, the decision to escalate conflict in South Ossetia in August 2008. Increasingly, both outgoing and incoming U.S. administrations recognized the difficulty of partnering with Georgia more on the basis of its democratic credentials than its roles in Caspian energy transit, the war on terror, or any kind of local balancing of Russian power while those democratic credentials were increasingly suspect.

Continuing to believe in the possibility of real democratic transformation in Georgia, the United States seeks to use the strategic partnership to promote this transformation. While the charter references "our two democracies," it also delicately notes that "an increasingly democratic Georgia [could] unleash the full creative potential of its industrious citizens." It also pledges Georgia to "bolster independent media, freedom of expression, and access to objective news and information." It notes the intention to cooperate to increase judicial independence, political pluralism, and "the transparency and accountability of Georgia's executive branch and legislative processes," while creating "a more competitive electoral environment."

The charter goes further, however, ultimately seeking to justify the strategic partnership on the basis of what it is trying to achieve: a democratic Georgia. "Democracy is the chief basis for political legitimacy, and therefore, stability"; "cooperation between democracies on defense and security is essential to respond effectively to threats to peace and security"; "an increasingly democratic Georgia can unleash the full creative potential of its industrious citizens, and thereby catalyze prosperity throughout the region and beyond." Stability, effective threat response, catalyst for regional prosperity: all the things a *strategic* partnership would seem to be intended

to achieve. The conclusion is clear: Georgian democracy is an essential foundation for the success of the strategic partnership.

The question is what happens if domestic and external pressures on democratization fail to have the desired impact? Georgia will be undergoing a set of three elections in May 2010 (local), 2012 (parliamentary), and 2013 (presidential), the results of which, it is hoped, will visibly increase the prospects that a consolidated *multiparty* democracy will take root in Georgia. Especially outside of the capital Tbilisi, this has proven a difficult bar to overcome. If government abuse of media control and administrative and police resources does not dissipate, or even if the ruling party maintains an overwhelming hold on power for other reasons (including opposition shortcomings), questions regarding the purpose of the U.S.-Georgia strategic partnership will be ever more frequently raised.

Strategic Partnership and Conflict Resolution

Finally, while the United States remains wary of inadvertently instigating the use of “hard power” in the region through its strategic partnership with Georgia, it has expressed a readiness to back a policy of “soft power” with regard to Georgia’s relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. One rarely noticed clause of the Charter declares U.S. and Georgian intent “to foster continued contacts” between residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and “the rest of Georgia.” In isolation, this might seem an empty expression. With the debut of the Georgian government’s State Strategy on Occupied Territories at the start of the year, however, a framework is now in place to pursue this objective.

The state strategy lays out Georgia’s intention not to isolate Abkhazia and South Ossetia but to engage their populations via a strategy of inclusion, outreach, and normalization of

relations. With it, Georgia has expressed a willingness to facilitate trade and travel linkages, both inside and outside Georgia, and recognized the necessity of engaging with *de facto* authorities via a “status neutral” framework that can pragmatically facilitate cooperation. Specific innovations include proposals to establish incentives for promoting joint business activities; extend Georgian social benefits and health care to residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; and cooperate with locally-stationed international organizations and relief agencies, as well as nongovernmental organizations and commercial entities, to facilitate proposed projects and services.

While elements of the strategy are quite progressive, it is not a project that is going to succeed without considerable external support. It is a simple matter for local and Russian authorities to reject the strategy out of hand as a disingenuous plan for reintegration or to stubbornly insist on recognition of independence as a precondition. The fact that the main objective of the strategy finds expression in the US-Georgian strategic partnership, however, means that Georgia can call on the United States to raise the strategy’s profile in its own dialogue with Russia (and can also anticipate financial assistance if implementation proves possible). Unlike the goal of rearming Georgia with defensive weapons, few would make the case that pursuing Georgian engagement with the breakaway regions in a “status-neutral” fashion could somehow contradict the goal of “promoting peace and stability in the region.”

Conclusion

In the aftermath of war and with prospects for NATO membership stalled even before they really became serious, the US-Georgian strategic partnership is the best substitute supporters of Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration could hope for. It also provides useful

guidance for the United States' further engagement with Georgia. It delicately bypasses the thorny question of how much to commit to Georgia's right of self-defense in the interests of maintaining regional peace and security, while seeking to deepen the relationship's economic foundations, openly address problems of democratic development, and support innovative methods of conflict resolution. As with many state-to-state relations, of course, stating these goals is much easier than implementing them.

Moreover, the partnership continues to avoid the question of whether it is wise (and possible) to more explicitly incorporate Georgia policy into a regional Caucasus, Caucasus-Black Sea, Caucasus-Caspian, or Eurasian policy. In particular, probably little thinking has been done on how changes in Ukrainian politics might affect not only U.S. policy toward the region but the role of Georgia within that policy. Institutionalizing a US-Georgian partnership made sense during a particular stage in the relationship. The question of how that relationship squares with broader regional policies and objectives continues to remain unanswered.