The Georgia-Russia War and NATO

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Q1: Should there be an independent investigation into the war's beginning?

A1: Georgia has publicly called for an independent investigation into the circumstances surrounding the beginning of the war, and the European Union has indicated that it intends to launch such an inquiry. Any such inquiry should consist of four major components: an examination of the gradual rise in tensions between Russia and Georgia from March until the beginning of August; an examination of the immediate pre-conflict actions of the belligerents and their proxies, focusing on the period from August 1 to 7; an examination of the conduct of the war itself by the belligerents and their proxies; and an examination of the postwar actions of both sides and their status of compliance with the cease-fire agreement. The inquiry should not limit itself to examining the actions of Georgia and Russia but should also examine the actions of their proxies, especially the South Ossetian government under Eduard Kokoity.

The United States should convey to Georgia how important it is that the Georgian government allow investigators full access to all Georgian personnel and records in the course of this inquiry. Georgia is likely to complain, correctly, that Russia and South Ossetia will refuse to allow such access or will provide only heavily filtered or doctored information. Assuming this occurs, the United States should ensure that the final EU report notes this fact.

An inquiry into the cause of the war is more than simply a historical exercise. If it is impartially and professionally conducted, its conclusions could significantly influence both U.S. and European policy toward Georgia in the near and midterm. The United States should impress on Georgia that full cooperation in the investigation is of critical importance. In order to allay Georgia’s concerns, if the United States does not participate in the inquiry, it should at a minimum monitor its progress to ensure that it produces as comprehensive and accurate a report as possible.

Q2: What political reform processes are currently under way in Georgia?

A2: The Georgian government has made much of the fact that the war has been a catalyst for accelerated political reforms in the country. Included in the list of reforms under way are the establishment of a parliamentary commission of inquiry into the war, headed by a member of the opposition; the strengthening of parliament’s role vis-à-vis the president; the creation of a C-SPAN-type television channel that carries live political events without comment; and judicial reforms to include the appointment of judges for life and an accelerated start date for trials by jury.

These are sincere efforts and deserve significant U.S. support. The United States should encourage these reform processes to be carried through to their conclusion and encourage the institutionalization of these and other reform processes. Currently, politics and political reform in Georgia are highly personalized—irreversible reform requires the depersonalization of these processes.

In this vein, while supporting the reform processes unveiled by President Mikheil Saakashvili and supporting him as the democratically elected leader of Georgia, the United States should make it clear that the development of a viable opposition is a net benefit to Georgia in the long term. The emergence of former Saakashvili protégés, such as former member of parliament Nino Burjanadze and former ambassador to the United Nations Irakli Alasania, as figures in the opposition should be taken in stride by the Saakashvili government. The fracturing of the United National Movement—represented by the splitting off of figures such as Burjanadze and Alasania—could represent the birth of a viable, responsible, and coherent opposition, something that does not currently exist in Georgia.

The United States should caution the Saakashvili government against actions that could be interpreted as suppression of the development of legitimate opposition. As Georgia pursues Euro-Atlantic integration, its progress in undertaking meaningful political reforms will become ever more important and more closely scrutinized.
Q3: What military reform processes are under way and what is the status of Georgia’s bid for NATO membership?

A3: Georgia was certainly disappointed but not surprised at the results of the early December NATO foreign ministerial meeting, which reaffirmed NATO’s earlier decision to withhold the extension of a Membership Action Plan to Georgia and Ukraine but to essentially guarantee their admission to the alliance at an unspecified future date. Although the decision of how and when to admit Georgia to NATO is very politically charged, given the U.S. position that Georgia belongs in NATO, there are certain things that both countries can be doing now to bring the date of Georgia’s membership closer.

First, Georgia’s military reform processes, which had been progressing at an impressive rate prior to the war with Russia, should be both accelerated and expanded. In order to be a contributor to alliance security, rather than a detractor from it, Georgia needs to develop the following capabilities: a secure command and control system; an integrated air defense system; a counter-artillery system made up of radars that can pinpoint the origin of artillery fire; a light, mobile, and lethal anti-armor capability; and a basic maritime sovereignty capability. As these systems are being developed, Georgia must create a combined arms doctrine that allows all of Georgia’s military systems and capabilities to be used in an integrated and mutually supporting manner.

One of the principal objections to NATO membership for Georgia is that Georgia cannot be defended in the event of another Russian attack, and therefore the extension of NATO Article 5 protection to Georgia carries unacceptable risk. Development of these capabilities will make a Russian attack not only less likely but also certainly less effective if it happens. The level of U.S. assistance in this effort is yet to be determined, but one can argue that if the United States continues to champion Georgia’s NATO membership, it has an obligation to assist Georgia in developing these capabilities because—as mentioned above—they will allow Georgia to be a contributor to alliance security instead of a liability.

The United States should also approach Georgia about reestablishing its commitment to international operations. Before the war with Russia, Georgia had 2,000 troops in Iraq under U.S. command and was preparing to send three contingents totaling approximately 450 troops to Afghanistan. If Georgia indicates that it is willing to again participate in these or other missions, the United States should consider restarting the counterinsurgency training mission that it had in Georgia prior to the war with Russia.

In the end, the decision of when and how to admit Georgia to NATO will have a political dimension as well as a military one. Russia and possibly even some NATO allies will protest at Georgia’s development of some of the military systems and capabilities discussed above. It is important to note that all of these systems and capabilities are defensive in nature, but to further allay concern at what could be seen as a rearming of Georgia, the Georgian politically leadership should formally and in writing pledge not to use force against Abkhazia and South Ossetia. President Saakashvili made such a pledge to President Nicolas Sarkozy of France during the cease-fire negotiations in August; he should now make that pledge publicly and in writing in an international forum such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, European Union, or United Nations.


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