Expanding security eastward: NATO and US military engagement in Georgia

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On 11 October in Kyrgyzstan, the six countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Collective Security Treaty (CST) - Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan - signed an agreement to create regional forces for collective defense, and to establish a collective security system facilitating their use on CST territory. In the South Caucasus, this latest effort initiated by Russia to establish a security mechanism within the CST framework exacerbates regional polarization by further dividing Armenia, that has extensive security ties to Russia, from its non-CST neighbors Georgia and Azerbaijan, which oppose Russian military expansion into the region. Increased Russian military influence in the South Caucasus has implications for regional stability, as well as for NATO and US efforts to shape the security environment by aligning the South Caucasus states more closely with the West. To enhance broader European security, NATO and the US should foster deeper military relationships with the South Caucasus states, particularly Western-oriented Georgia.

Western efforts to accelerate military cooperation with Georgia have been noticeable of late. NATO Secretary-General George Robertson recently visited Georgia and emphasized that European security was "inseparably linked to that of other countries." On 26 September Robertson told a conference in Tbilisi on Regional Cooperation and Partnership with NATO that "security is only possible, if, within Europe and its surrounding area, there is stability and a commitment to solve problems together…the more secure our neighbors are, the more secure
we are.” (NATO RELEASE, 26 Sep 00) Robertson's visit to Georgia underscored NATO's resolve to expand security eastward under the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, the Alliance's main framework for regional cooperation. Furthermore, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Henry Shelton, has visited Tbilisi earlier in September to demonstrate continued US commitment to Georgia and the increased priority the South Caucasus now has in US military planning. Over the last few years, NATO and the US have dramatically increased the size and scope of PfP activities, as well as the number and quality of military-to-military contacts with Georgia.

NATO and the US want to forge closer ties with Georgia not least because of its location at the crossroads of Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East and the need to ensure access to Caspian energy resources. Georgia constitutes a natural land corridor for the transportation of oil from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean. Georgia's borders with Azerbajian, Armenia and NATO member Turkey enhances the argument for greater security cooperation between NATO and the South Caucasus states, using Georgia as the foundation. Senior NATO and US military analysts believe that a South Caucasus bloc aligned with NATO and the US would be an engine for enhanced regional security and stability.

**Forms of cooperation**

PfP constitutes NATO's chief engagement tool in the former Soviet republics and the cornerstone for deepening NATO and US military engagement in the South Caucasus (The program contains 19 NATO members and 26 partner states including all three South Caucasus states). PfP activities focus on civil emergency planning, civil-military relations, defense policy and strategy, and military reform. This initiative reflects the alliance's desire to share its experience and expertise with other countries, particularly Georgia and successors to the former USSR, and the perception that it is in NATO's strategic interest to promote the democratic transformation of these countries. NATO members, such as the US and Turkey, provide military assistance to Georgia on a bilateral basis in a
way that often complements PfP.

Georgia joined PfP at the program's inception in 1994 and has become one of its most active constituents, using PfP as a tool to bring its armed forces closer to NATO standards. A Georgian infantry platoon currently operates with a Turkish peacekeeping battalion in Kosovo. Its role in the KFOR mission is a source of great national pride and demonstrates Georgia's ability to work smoothly with NATO in peacekeeping. During the platoon's rotation in September, Georgia's defense minister, Lieutenant General David Tevzadze, explained that each successive Georgian platoon "goes to Kosovo as raw recruits and returns as well-trained soldiers." (THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, 29-30 Sep 00)

Along with the situation in the Balkans, regional security in the South Caucasus has been discussed regularly in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), which provides the overall framework for cooperation between NATO and partner nations. The EAPC established an Open Ended Ad Hoc Working Group on the Caucasus to intensify efforts to use the Council as a vehicle for conflict prevention and crisis management. This sub-regional group could form the basis for a new security architecture in the region and help to develop a regional stability pact in coordination with the European Union (EU), Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations. According to Georgia's first deputy foreign minister, Mr. Giorgi Burduli, if the concept for "the Stability Pact in the Caucasus bears fruit, the role of the EAPC, along with other international organizations, would be substantial in terms of consultation and practical cooperation." (NATO RELEASE, 25 May 00) He stated further that "regional cooperation in the Caucasus is still weak," and that the EAPC should encourage the South Caucasus states to continue using the ad hoc working group to resolve regional issues such as facilitating negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan to address the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Having an agreement such as the US-Baltic Charter or the EU's Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe "would go a long way towards diffusing regional conflicts.
and anchor these vulnerable states firmly with more powerful countries and international bodies." (PERSPECTIVE, Nov-Dec 99) A regional security system underpinned by NATO and the US, including an EU stability pact would also go a long way toward enhancing regional security.

In addition to its active involvement in the EAPC, Georgia has hosted a significant number of PfP activities including a seminar on "Regional Security Cooperation in the Caucasus," the first forum of its kind, in October 1998.

Georgia will be hosting several activities and joint exercises in 2001 including its first multilateral PfP exercise, a maritime and amphibious venture involving nations bordering the Black Sea such as Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey and Ukraine.

There is room for expanding opportunities within PfP to promote practical regional cooperation in the South Caucasus by applying experience from other regions. In late September, for example, NATO and the Ukraine conducted a disaster relief exercise in the Trans-Carpathian region of Western Ukraine within the framework of PfP to test Euro-Atlantic disaster response capability. The exercise used a flood scenario and consisted of two parts: a command post exercise followed by a field training exercise. The first phase tested the procedures used by the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Center (EADRCC) at NATO Headquarters and national disaster response coordination centers in response to a request for international assistance from Ukraine. The second phase focused on the activities of disaster response teams from 11 countries operating as part of the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Unit (EADRU), marking the first time the EADRU was exercised as a whole. Other activities included search and rescue, provisions for life support and medical care, water purification and cleaning of contaminated rivers. (NATO RELEASE, Exercise Trans-Carpathia 2000, Sep 00)

The exercise actually built on the experience gained by the Ukraine and EADRCC in dealing with major flooding in the Trans-Carpathian region in 1998.
A disaster relief exercise program could also be developed for the South Caucasus using the same template based on the lessons learned from earthquakes in Armenia and eastern Turkey, respectively, in 1988 and 1999. This would improve disaster response capability and, more importantly, might perhaps promote systematic regional cooperation between Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as other regional powers such as Russia and Turkey.

Further cooperation with the West could prove useful in handling regional security problems. Since gaining independence in 1991, Georgia has been troubled by several regional disputes. Two regions, Abkhazia, located on the Black Sea, and South Ossetia, on the Russian border, tried to secede from Georgia in the early 1990s. Actually, Russia has been implicated in supporting secessionist movements in both autonomous regions, thus further complicating Georgian-Russian relations. Although there has not been substantial fighting in either region during the last few years, the situation remains very tense since no comprehensive solution is in sight.

Russia's military campaigns in Chechnya constitute another source of instability. For instance, "points of dispute that have arisen as a result of the conflict include (1) Russian pressure to patrol on Georgian territory, (2) Moscow's perennial allegations that Georgia is serving as a base of operations and support for Chechen rebels, and (3) heightened alarm regarding Russia's role in Georgia's breakaway regions." (JANE'S DEFENCE, 25 Apr 00) The possibility that Georgia is being used as a transit country for Chechen fighters and weapons is remote since Chechens assisted Abkhaz secessionists in their fight for independence against Georgia. Moscow's accusations remain an expression of continued hostility toward Georgia.

NATO and the US can play a significant role in helping Georgia strengthen its security mechanisms. Georgia already plays an active role in the EAPC and PfP. Expanded opportunities for increased security cooperation in areas such as
defense planning and air defense exist within the PfP framework. Similarly, the US has recently expanded bilateral security cooperation with Georgia. According to a Pentagon spokesman, US military cooperation is designed to help Georgia develop military capabilities necessary to preserve its territorial integrity and become more self-sufficient in defense matters such as border security and military reorganization. US European Command (USEUCOM) recently conducted a defense assessment of Georgia's military and made several recommendations for restructuring the armed forces including the creation of a rapid reaction force consisting of 1-3 light brigades to provide more flexibility in handling regional crises. According to a USEUCOM spokesman, future US military cooperation will be based on achieving this and other recommendations contained in the report.

NATO and the US can also foster regional cooperation by helping to resolve the tensions caused by separatist elements and by seeking the withdrawal of Russian military bases from Georgia in compliance with the CFE treaty. NATO has said that the withdrawal of Russian troops and military equipment from bases in Georgia would be a "positive step," which Russia must take in order to comply with the agreement reached at the OSCE Istanbul Summit to reduce Russian military presence in Georgia. However, Russian compliance is not guaranteed: The four bases on Georgian territory - Akhalkalaki (on the southern border with Turkey), Batumi (on the Black Sea coast), Gudauta (Abkhazia), and Vaziani (near the capital, Tbilisi) - were recently described by Moscow as "all that Russia has left of the once formidable Transcaucasus Military District." (KOMMERSANT, 1 Aug 00; via The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press) Additionally, Russian peacekeeping forces stationed in Abkhazia under a 1994 Georgia-Abkhazia cease-fire agreement continue to strain relations. According to the Georgian deputy defense minister, General Guram Nikolashvili, having "Russian peacekeepers in Abkhazia is just like having them in Georgia." (JANE'S DEFENCE, 23 Apr 97) NATO and the US should pressure Russia to transfer authority for the peacekeeping mission in Abkhazia to an international peacekeeping force under a UN or OCSE mandate rather than a CIS mandate.
Dismantling Russian bases and withdrawing Russian "peacekeepers" have been among the thorniest issues between Russia and Georgia and long-standing goals of Georgian foreign policy.

**Recommendations**

Establishing western alliances and working diligently to improve military skills suggest that Georgia is actively pursuing an invitation to join NATO. PfP has advanced the reform processes of many partner states, particularly concerning questions of how to organize and control military forces in democratic societies. However, it has already fostered a "degree of technical and conceptual interoperability among (NATO and non-NATO) forces that is unprecedented."

(NATO RELEASE, 26 Sep 00) Georgia has made considerable progress in terms of military reform and restructuring. According to a US defense assessment, a "Ministry of Defense has been created, new laws governing defense have been passed, and important programs of bilateral and multilateral foreign assistance and cooperation have been established." At the start this year of his second presidential term, Mr. Eduard Shevardnadze, said he was planning to "start negotiations for entering NATO" in 2005. (DEUTSCHE PRESSE-AGENTUR, 1018 GMT, 30 Apr 00; via lexis-nexis) Participation in PfP remains essential to joining NATO, as it provides a "well-established way" of transforming the military and defense establishment based on Western models and developing interoperability with NATO forces. (NATO REVIEW, Summer 1999)

Georgia is also a member of an emerging regional security structure known as GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova). The GUUAM consultation group "was formed in 1997 in response to concerns about the upward revision of CFE flank ceilings." (NIS OBSERVED, 13 Sep 00) GUUAM member states consult on political, economic and security issues. The rise of GUUAM indicates the "hollowness" of the CIS Collective Security Treaty in resolving regional security issues and could prove a useful alternative to the Russian-controlled CIS security pact. However, a NATO-based regional security
structure along with an EU-sponsored regional stability pact may still be the preferred option of most interested parties.

The South Caucasus is a region of growing potential and strategic importance. Georgia is viewed as a strategic partner and key ally in the region. NATO and the US have used PfP and bilateral arrangements extensively to expand security cooperation with Georgia and establish a foothold in the South Caucasus. According to Robertson, the relationship with Georgia is "dynamic, evolving and rewarding for both NATO and Georgia." It remains to be seen how NATO and the US will deal with the very real hurdles to regional security created by secessionist movements and the stationing of Russian "peacekeepers" in Georgia as well as by the potential spill over of the Chechen war into the South Caucasus. In response, NATO and the US should continue to support Georgia's efforts to resolve separatist conflicts, to bring about withdrawal of Russian military bases, troops and equipment, to improve border defenses and to transform its armed forces, as well as expanding security cooperation with all three South Caucasus states under both NATO's PfP program and bilateral arrangements. NATO and the US should also develop a long-term strategy for military engagement in the region to include helping to prepare Georgia for eventual NATO membership. Finally, NATO and the US should take the lead, through the EAPC's Ad Hoc Working Group on the Caucasus, to establish a comprehensive regional security system in the South Caucasus.