

Georgia and the United States: Strategic Partnership for Democracy and Security

Remarks by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia H.E. Mr. Grigol Vashadze at the
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Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to be here today, addressing an institution that has done so much to foster cooperation among nations and to achieve practical results on a global scale. I am especially grateful to be speaking to you at such a critical moment in my nation's history, and at a time when our two nations have embarked on even deeper path of friendship and cooperation.

As we continue to recover from Russia's invasion of our country and its devastating effects, we look to the active engagement of our friends, allies, and the international community. Here again Carnegie's role has been central to our efforts. We are guided by the ideas of our friends at Carnegie and elsewhere as we work to establish democracy, freedom, security, and prosperity in Georgia and in the region as a whole.

Georgia's priorities

Before I speak with you about the principal reason for my visit this week – to advance the strategic partnership between Georgia and the United States – I hope you might indulge a brief review out of the goals set by my government and our people been since the war last August. Namely, our priorities have been:

1. To continue to advance democracy, human rights, and the establishment of effective state institutions;
2. To further our economic development in the midst not only of a global crisis, but of the investment chill that comes with war;
3. To continue to work with our friends on how best to peacefully restore our territorial integrity;
4. To accelerate our European and Euro-Atlantic integration; and
5. To ensure security for all of Georgia, without which the previous goals are simply impossible to achieve.

Without the assistance and support of the United States, these ambitions would be difficult if not impossible to meet. Our relationship with America has been fundamental for Georgia's democratic progress and security. We are certain that a close partnership will help both our nations reap the benefits of democracy and security in Georgia, as well as in the region as a whole.

U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership

Our certainty in this regard is based on recent experience. In 1991, after regaining the independence that we had lost in 1801, Georgia entered a decade of internal strife and political and socio-economic instability. Yet in the past five years we have achieved tremendous success in forming a viable state, which would have been impossible without the support and advice of the United States, a nation that we consider one of our closest and most important allies.

Over the past several years, our nations have been cooperating in various fields of mutual interest – from advancing democracy to fighting international terrorism to promoting Eurasia's energy security.

Even with these accomplishments, however, what drives our relationship are the values that we share: a commitment to upholding human rights and individual freedoms, preserving the sovereignty of states and respecting their free choice, and promoting market economies and the rule of law. I believe it was both our firm commitment to these values and our cooperation on key policy matters that allowed our two countries to upgrade our relationship to the level of a strategic partnership. This is now evolving from a set of common principles to a full agenda of tangible actions across several areas.

The U.S.-Georgia Strategic Charter was signed in January, and the first meeting of the US-Georgia Commission—which oversees the development of the Charter—was held yesterday. The Charter is the central framework for an increasingly close partnership to advance democracy and security. The signing of the Charter in January, during a challenging time for Georgia, was a clear demonstration that the U.S. would not deviate from its policy of promoting democracy and supporting the sovereignty of its allies.

Similarly, Georgia has shown its commitment our American partner during its most difficult times. We have always supported the U.S. in the fight against terrorism. We have

already partnered with the U.S. in Iraq, where Georgia was one of the largest contributors to the coalition forces. Additionally, despite the fragile security environment in Georgia, we have made the decision to contribute to the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, and will send a re-enforced company there in the coming months.

As we all know, these past ten months have been extremely difficult ones for my country, the interests and values our nations share have been endangered by Russia. This is why Georgia, now more than ever, needs the continuous and firm U.S. support.

The effects of the Russia-Georgia war have put my country in a difficult situation, compelling us to stay vigilant against external provocations and threats, while also advancing our reform agenda. Yet despite all the hindrances and problems caused by Russia, Georgia is committed to its democratic reform efforts, which we know contribute to security and stability in the region.

My people have always aspired to democracy and peace. In fact, Georgia has chosen democracy as its weapon of resistance against Russian aggression. Our Government remains firm in pushing forward with reforms and development. We recognize that many Georgians face real poverty and economic pressure, a fact exacerbated by the global crisis. Therefore, our Government is ready and willing to continue pressing for reforms in all directions. The second wave of the Rose revolution—which is aimed at further strengthening the rule of law, increasing political pluralism and bolstering freedom of expression—is our answer to the challenges we face in the aftermath of the Russian aggression.

The fact of our political pluralism is everywhere evident: in Parliament, in the media, and, occasionally, on our streets as well! Today, opposition parties play a greater role in the processes of parliamentary governance and decision making. The participation of the opposition in our Constitutional, Judicial and Justice System reform efforts has been further encouraged and increased. Civilian control of our defense and security sector has grown, which also contributes to greater political pluralism and transparency.

At the same time, we are firmly convinced that sheer will is not sufficient to further advance our democratic reforms. Security and stability is a decisive factor to this end.

To pursue our goal of building a strong, enduring and democratic state that is at peace with its neighbors, we are actively cooperating with international organizations that share this vision.

Moreover, the Government of Georgia is determined to stay firm on the economic development track. Despite the heavy burden engendered by the Russia-Georgia War and the global economic crisis, we intend to carry out policies that support our market economy, a favorable investment climate and, very importantly, maintain a reliable energy corridor in order to contribute to European energy security.

In the mists of our efforts—and allow me to say this bluntly—Russia is zealously seeking to crush Georgian statehood: A state, I should note, that is based on liberal democratic values, a state ready and willing to maintain good relations with its neighbors in parallel to integrating into western structures. Russia's actions reveal its belief that having a democracy at its borders is an obstacle to realizing control over its so-called “zones of privileged interests.”

The Russia-Georgia War did not begin and end in August 2008. The conflict between our two states actually started when the Soviet Union fell and erupted into violence in the early nineties, when Russia placed Georgia's Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region under its control. This is when Russia's policy of the creeping annexation of Georgian territories began. Every phase of this War since then has been accompanied by brutal and deliberate ethnic cleansing committed by Russia as a policy tool to achieve its goals.

Alas, ladies and gentlemen, the tragedy of ethnic cleansing continues into 21st Century Europe.

Georgian territories literally have been cleansed of ethnic Georgians. The tactic of passportization—whereby Russian passports are distributed forcibly and on a massive scale—allowed Moscow to claim that its interference in Georgia stemmed from its obligation to protect Russian citizens. This exact excuse was voiced to justify last August's invasion, just another hot phase of the Russia-Georgia War.

In the modern interdependent world, where wars are supposed to be a thing of the past, it is unfortunate that Russia – a country with great potential to be a leader working towards

peace and development on a global scale – is preoccupied with committing military aggression and occupation of parts of another sovereign state.

Russia obviously did not achieve its goal last August because, despite the disturbing effects of the conflict, Georgian statehood is very much alive, our democracy continues to blossom, and the country's eagerness to become part of western institutions is stronger than ever.

What remains alarming is that Russia's unfinished business leaves substantial room for Georgia's insecurity. This is especially so in light of Russia's significant military buildup in Georgia's occupied territories—a situation aggravated by the fact that there is currently no mechanism in place to defend my country's sovereignty and statehood.

There are now more than 16,000 well-armed Russian soldiers occupying different parts of Georgian territory, ready to strike at any time, not to mention the illegal armed groups essentially serving under Russian command. The infrastructure for Russia's permanent military presence, including land, air and naval bases, is being constructed in the occupied regions.

The illegal armed units of the puppet regimes and their Russian allies undertake constant military provocations aimed at the further escalation of tensions. The increased military presence today will enable Russia to inflict a deadly blow much faster than last August.

Frankly speaking, Russia poses an existential threat to my country.

In the 20 years since the end of the Cold War, Russia has continued to cling to its former satellites, attempting to maintain its spheres of influence and trying to reassert its hegemony over its neighborhood to realize its political and economic interests in the Black Sea and Caspian regions, as well as in Central Asia and Europe as a whole. Russia's military presence in Georgia, including land, aerial and naval military bases, clearly demonstrates Russia's forward looking politics of serving its interests in the entire region.

The South Caucasus is one of the critical routes from landlocked Central Asia to Europe. Having once stood on the Silk Road, Georgia remains an integral player in the transit of Central Asian and Caspian energy to Europe. Through its actions in Georgia, Russia has attempted to maintain an energy monopoly in the region

This, in turn, allows Moscow to earn substantial income in order to feed its internal political goals and to maintain leverage when it comes to international negotiations. Russia doesn't hide that it will use force to ensure its energy monopoly over Caspian and Central Asian energy resources, something that is clearly stressed in Russia's latest national security strategy.

Russian aggression in August also shows that Moscow is ready to halt democracy in its so-called "zones of privileged interests" and cut short the endeavor of its former satellites to join western structures. Indeed, for Russia, democracy and close ties with western institutions at its borders equates to the west breathing down its neck. In Russia's view, the example it sets in Georgia will make neighboring countries think twice before seeking to join western institutions. After all, Georgia is not the only country in the region whose territorial integrity has been violated.

This is one way for Russia to thwart democracy and project its influence within these "zones". Moscow wants no international presence at its borders whatsoever. The international monitoring missions—the one that remains at least—continue being blocked from accessing the occupied territories, where coercion and oppression of ethnic Georgians is a daily phenomenon.

The most recent demonstration of Russia's intent was its veto last week of a resolution that would have extended the UN Observer Mission to Georgia (UNOMIG). This, in addition to recently blocking the OSCE Observer Mission, leaves Georgia's occupied territories completely in Russian hands. We are hopeful that the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia will be reinforced and that it will gain access to the occupied territories in order to assuage the gruesome situation inside those areas.

Ladies and Gentlemen, international law is the only mechanism to hold states responsible for their actions. All nations, especially those that claim to be reliable actors, ought to hold dear the international norms and principles because otherwise, there is no chance for the stability, security and well being of people world-wide.

Russia's desire to be seen as an important and trustworthy regional and global player is dubious at best in light of its continuous breach of international law, as well as its ongoing

violation of all points of the 6 Point Ceasefire Agreement, which its President signed last August 12, in the presence of President Sarkozy.

Russia must be held responsible for its aggressive actions against Georgia and its attempt to forcibly and illegally hold the reigns in its so-called “zones of privileged interests,” not only for the sake of allowing freedom and democracy to flourish in Georgia and ensuring stability in the region as a whole, but more importantly for making certain that the suffering undergone by the citizens of Georgia during the Russia-Georgia War is not felt by people elsewhere.

We therefore need to address Russia’s increasingly aggressive policy in a swift and resolute manner, in order not to lose the gains obtained after the Cold War.

There are two ways for a state to ensure its national security. On the one hand, it can employ its own capabilities; and on the other, it can look to the international community for support. An international mechanism is critical to ensuring security in Georgia, because it would be a Herculean task for my country to confront Russia on its own.

If Russia is not deterred now, before it embarks on a new military adventure, efforts to prevent such an outcome later will simply be too late. Now is the time to save Georgia’s statehood, to allow democracy to spread in the region and let security reign in Europe as a whole. Credible security mechanisms are necessary to deter Russia’s future military adventures because time is running out.

In this regard, our effort to join western structures derives from the shared values and principles that Georgians hold very dear. European and Euro-Atlantic integration remains Georgia’s foreign policy priority. We are determined to undertake all the necessary steps in order to advance the integration process and comply with required standards.

This integration is a natural process for Georgia. It is critical to our country’s security, and also serves the interests of our allies, who seek security and stability more broadly throughout Europe. Georgia by no means wants to import its problems into NATO or other structures. But there is truth in the notion that had Georgia been accepted into NATO prior to August, Russian aggression would simply have been deterred and avoided. Let us remain hopeful that the Alliance will not let the same thing happen ever again.

Georgia greatly appreciates the continuous support of the US for deepening our integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions and enhanced security cooperation between our two countries. Georgia will work fervently in order to strengthen its candidacy for NATO membership and take full advantage of the Annual National Plan (ANP), which is a great opportunity for my country to get closer to NATO on our way to eventual membership.

With democracy as our weapon, the notion that the “strong do what they have to do and the weak accept what they have to accept” is a thing of the past. On the contrary, Georgia measures its strength by the level of its democracy, by its efforts to cooperate with states towards peace, security, stability and mutual respect.

Georgia believes not in “zones of privileged interests”, but in zones of cooperation. We remain hopeful that the international community will firmly stand by Georgia and therefore support freedom, security, stability and justice.

I will never tire in saying how important US engagement is to Georgia. Our countries are natural partners with shared democratic values. Security and the spread of democracy stand at the core of our mutual interests. Our common efforts can deter those who want to thwart our freedoms. Georgia’s integration into western institutions will serve as a model for all states in the region to emulate, by choosing freedom over captivity, territorial integrity over territorial problems, and security over fear. With this in mind, I remain hopeful and optimistic.

Thank you.