

Creativity and Bold Leadership Needed for Georgia's NATO Membership

Luke Coffey

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Georgia is a proven ally to the U.S. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said in 2016: “Georgia has all the practical tools to become a member of NATO.”

Georgia wants—and deserves to be—a NATO ally. But, since Russia invaded in 2008, it has occupied parts of Georgia, preventing membership.

A solution is for all of Georgia to join NATO, with only those regions that are not under Russian occupation receiving NATO's Article 5 security guarantee.

It has been more than a decade since Georgia was promised eventual membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) at the 2008 Bucharest Summit. Later that year, Russia invaded Georgia and continues to occupy Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region¹—equal to one-fifth of Georgia's internationally recognized territory. After years of economic, governance, and military reforms, this partial occupation remains the primary roadblock to Georgia's NATO membership. Now is the time for fresh thinking and bold ideas to allow Georgia to join NATO. Russia knows that all it has to do to stop a country from joining NATO is to invade and partially occupy it. NATO should remove this obstacle and push for Georgia's speedy membership by temporarily amending Article 6 of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty, for which there is precedent. However, doing so will require political will and strong leadership from the U.S., Europe, and even Georgia.

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A Reliable Partner

After the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, and the subsequent occupation of 20 percent of its territory, Georgia has transformed its military and has been steadfast in its support of NATO, as well as non-NATO, U.S.-led overseas security operations. Georgia has contributed thousands of troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, and hundreds of peacekeepers to the Balkans and Africa. Even with the Russian invasion and its aftermath, Georgia has not been deterred from getting closer to the West. This has made Georgia a net contributor to transatlantic security.

Georgia is important to the Alliance for three main reasons:

1. **Georgia is a proven and dependable ally in Iraq and Afghanistan.**

It is not well-known that at the time of the 2008 Russian invasion, Georgia had the second-largest number of troops in Iraq after the U.S. In 2012, when many NATO countries were rushing for the door in Afghanistan, Georgia added hundreds of troops to the mission there. At the height of the Georgian contribution to Afghanistan, it had more than 2,000 troops serving in some of the deadliest places in the country, if not the world, in Helmand and Kandahar Provinces. Today, Georgia has 870 troops in Afghanistan,² making it the largest non-NATO troop contributor to the NATO training mission.

2. **Georgia's strategic location makes it important for U.S. geopolitical objectives in the Eurasian region.** Located in the South Caucasus, Georgia sits at a crucial geographical and cultural cross-roads and has proven itself to be strategically important for military and economic reasons for centuries. Today, Georgia's strategic location is just as important. For example, Georgia offered its territory, infrastructure, and logistic capabilities for the transit of NATO forces and cargo for Afghanistan. Over the years, Georgia has modernized key airports and port facilities in the country. This is particularly important when it comes to the Black Sea region. Key pipelines like the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline, the Baku–Supsa pipeline, and the soon-to-be-operational Southern Gas Corridor transit through Georgia, as do important rail lines like the recently opened Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway. The oil and gas pipelines are particularly important to Europe's energy security, and therefore NATO's interest in the region.

MAP 1

Russian-Occupied Territory in Georgia



SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

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3. Georgia's journey to democracy is an example for the region.

Since regaining independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia has been on a steady journey to democracy. For the sake of regional stability, it is in America's interest that Georgia remains on this path. Over the years, successive Georgian governments have pursued an agenda of liberalizing the economy, cutting bureaucracy, fighting corruption, and embracing democracy. Since the peaceful Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia has been firmly committed to the transatlantic community. Georgia also represents the idea in Europe that each country has the sovereign ability to determine its own path, to decide with whom it has relations, and how and by whom it is governed. Territorial integrity must be respected and no outside

actor (in this case, Russia) should have a veto on membership or relationships with organizations like the European Union or NATO.

A Long Journey to NATO

Few countries in Europe express as much enthusiasm for NATO as Georgia—even though it is not yet a member of the Alliance. The NATO–Georgian relationship has never been closer, but more work remains to be done.³ Georgia was first promised eventual membership at the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008. Since then, this commitment to membership has been reaffirmed at each subsequent NATO summit. As NATO Secretary–General Jens Stoltenberg said in December 2016: “Georgia has all the practical tools to become a member of NATO.”⁴

When speaking to U.S. and European policymakers, one of the biggest concerns about Georgia’s entry into NATO is the idea that it would trigger an automatic war with Russia over its occupation of the Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia because of NATO’s Article 5 mutual security guarantee. No matter what is said publicly, many policymakers believe that as long as these regions are under Russian occupation, Georgia can never join NATO.

Conversely, Russia uses its continued occupation of the Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia as the best way to keep Georgia out of NATO and other international organizations. This is a *de facto* veto held by Moscow—and is unacceptable.

A Creative Solution

The Russian occupation makes Georgia’s membership a remote possibility unless there is a new and creative approach to the situation.

All of Georgia’s internationally recognized territory, which includes the Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia, could be invited to join NATO. However, NATO could amend Article 6 of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty (which defines which territories fall under the Article 5 protection) to temporarily exclude the Russian-occupied region from NATO’s Article 5 protection. This could be done during Georgia’s accession protocol process.

So all of Georgia would join NATO, but only the regions of Georgia that are *not* under Russian occupation will receive NATO’s security guarantee (approximately 80 percent of the country), for now.

It is important to note that this would be a *temporary* measure until Georgia’s full, internationally recognized territory is re-established by peaceful means. With the right leadership, this plan will work because:

- **There is a precedent for amending or changing Article 6.** It was done in 1951 as part of the accession protocol for Turkey and Greece when the two countries joined NATO.⁵ In 1963, the North Atlantic Council noted that the original inclusion of the Algerian Departments of France in Article 6 was no longer applicable due to Algeria's independence.⁶
- **There are countless examples of NATO members that do not have all of their territory under the protection of Article 5.** Examples include the U.S. and Guam, and the U.K. and the Falkland Islands. Even West Germany and East Germany during the Cold War offer an interesting example.
- **This plan is consistent with Georgia's non-use-of-force pledge for regaining control of the occupied regions.**⁷ This proposal could not work for Ukraine, for example, because Kyiv does not have a non-use-of-force pledge regarding the Donbas region and Crimea. Since the Georgian government has already pledged not to use force to regain its occupied regions, it does not need an Article 5 security guarantee for these two regions if it joins NATO.

Bold Leadership Needed

Georgian NATO membership would bring more stability to the South Caucasus and transatlantic region. This proposal is not without its challenges, however, and the U.S. government and Congress should:

- **Prepare now for a serious discussion about Georgia at the London Summit in December 2019.** Georgia's NATO limbo has lasted too long, and the Alliance must develop a demonstrable way forward for membership. Many in Central and Eastern Europe will be very supportive of this idea, and the U.S. should build a coalition inside NATO to push Georgia's future membership onto the agenda at London. There is plenty of time for U.S. officials to start working with their European counterparts to make this happen.
- **Convince European leaders that this plan is a realistic way forward for Georgian membership.** Due to Russia's partial occupation, most Europeans are lukewarm at best about Georgia joining NATO. The U.S. will have to convince Europeans that amending Article

6 to temporarily exclude the occupied regions is a viable option that addresses their concerns about an automatic war with Russia if Georgia joins NATO.

- **Convince Georgian leaders that this plan is a realistic way forward for membership.** The Georgian government should convince its people that amending Article 6 is a realistic and reasonable way to admit Georgia into NATO and should not be viewed as the Georgian government, the U.S., or NATO changing its policy on Georgia's territorial integrity (which includes Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region).
- **Counter Russian propaganda.** Russia will spin this idea as a choice between Georgians joining NATO and giving up on the two occupied regions. This is a false dichotomy. The Georgian people should never give up on their territorial integrity in exchange for NATO membership. Thankfully, this is neither what NATO is asking Georgia to do, nor what the proposal to amend Article 6 is suggesting.

Conclusion

Right now, Russia knows that all it has to do to prevent a country from joining NATO is to invade and then partially occupy it. Not only would temporarily amending Article 6 be a realistic and reasonable way to allow Georgia to join NATO more quickly, it would deny Moscow its de facto veto on countries under partial Russian occupation. The only question remaining is if leaders on both sides of the Atlantic have the political will and the creativity required to make NATO membership possible for Georgia. The London Summit will be a test.

Luke Coffey is Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.

Endnotes

1. The term “South Ossetia” is commonly used to describe the area north of Tbilisi that is under illegal Russian occupation. This name is derived from the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast created in 1922 by the Soviet Union. In 1991, the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast declared independence from the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic which kicked off the 1991–1992 South Ossetia War. When Georgia regained its independence from the Soviet Union later in 1991, it established 11 internal subdivisions (two autonomous republics and nine regions). The area in Georgia that attempted to break away in 1991, that now has been under Russian occupation since 2008, is commonly referred to as South Ossetia. However, South Ossetia is not one of the 11 subdivisions of Georgia, and instead includes parts of Mtskheta-Mtianeti, Shida Kartli, Imereti, Racha-Lechkhumi, and the Kvemo Svaneti regions. Since using the term South Ossetia feeds into Russia’s propaganda, this *Issue Brief* refers to this region as the Tskhinvali region. (The biggest city under Russian occupation is Tskhinvali.)
2. Cory Welt, “Georgia: Background and U.S. Policy,” Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, April 1, 2019, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45307.pdf> (accessed June 6, 2019).
3. For a detailed breakdown of the NATO–Georgia relationship, see Luke Coffey, “NATO Membership for Georgia: In U.S. and European Interest,” Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 199, January 29, 2018, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/nato-membership-georgia-us-and-european-interest>.
4. Thea Morrison, “Stoltenberg: Georgia Has All Practical Tools to Become NATO Member,” *Georgia Today*, December 3, 2016, <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/5297/Stoltenberg%3A-Georgia-Has-All-Practical-Tools-to-Become-NATO-Member> (accessed June 6, 2019).
5. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Protocol to the North Atlantic Treaty on the Accession of Greece and Turkey,” October 22, 1951, last updated September 29, 2009, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17245.htm (accessed June 6, 2019).
6. The North Atlantic Treaty, April 4, 1949, last updated April 10, 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm (accessed June 6, 2019).
7. “Georgia Makes ‘Unilateral Pledge’ of Non-Use of Force,” Civil Georgia, November 23, 2010, <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22880> (accessed June 6, 2019).