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## Georgia along the path to NATO membership

By Archil Gegeshidze, Georgia's Ambassador to the United States

When the leaders of NATO member countries descend upon Wales next week (September 4-5, 2014), they will undoubtedly be greeted with a full agenda of weighty issues. Among others, the world will be watching closely to see how NATO acts to strengthen its relationship with Georgia, a close US ally that has increased freedom, stability and economic prosperity while supporting Euro-Atlantic values around the world.

The United States and NATO should use the summit as an opportunity to voice their support for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations and provide a clear path for Georgia's NATO membership.

Georgia has consistently demonstrated its steadfast commitment to America and NATO since its independence in 1991. Thousands of its soldiers have served shoulder to shoulder with US forces in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere, often taking on some of the hardest assignments.

Georgia is the largest non-NATO contributor to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, and it has also served as a key logistical hub for bringing troops and supplies in and out of Afghanistan. Georgia also recently joined the EU-led peacekeeping mission to the Central African Republic and from 2015 will join the NATO Response Force. Additionally, Georgia is a member of the European Union's Training Mission in Mali that is tasked with developing Mali's military instructors.

Georgia has initiated significant military reforms to ensure it can operate effectively with NATO, such as improvements in key defense capabilities, stronger civilian control and transparency, and greater assistance to soldiers and their families.

In fact, Georgia has contributed more resources to NATO missions and implemented more policies in line with NATO requirements than many NATO members. Fairly enough, NATO has praised Georgia's progress in military transformation numerous times.

In addition to military reforms, Georgia has made significant strides in strengthening democratic institutions and rule of law. Over the last two years, Georgia has completed democratic parliamentary, presidential, and local elections, each deemed free and fair by the international community. The parliamentary election of 2012 represented the first ever peaceful transfer of power in Georgia's history, and set an important precedent in the region.

The current government has made clear its commitment to democratic reforms by implementing a progressive Human Rights Strategy and Action Plan and building a more independent and accountable judicial system.

After successfully implementing numerous democratic and economic reforms and committing to many more, on June 27, 2014, Georgia entered into an Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the European Union. In the face of Russian pressure – including the continued occupation of Georgian territory by its military forces – Georgia declared loudly its goal of joining the European Union.

Under this agreement, Georgia will continue to bring its laws and regulations in line with EU standards and pave the way for deeper economic, social, and political integration. This ambitious project will allow Georgia for transposing more than 80 percent of the EU Acquis. Apart from the Association Agreement, Georgia is also in the process of negotiating a visa-free travel agreement with the EU, which will greatly increase economic, travel, and educational opportunities for Georgian citizens.

Georgia's foreign policy is anchored in the will of the people to move closer to the Euro-Atlantic space, while seeking a constructive relationship with Russia. According to a recent public opinion survey conducted by the National Democratic Institute, over 70 percent of Georgians support the government's position of joining NATO and EU.

The Georgian people are confident in this path because they understand the clear benefits it will bring them. Therefore, Georgians seek to join the Euro-Atlantic community, with whom they share history, culture and, most importantly, values. Georgia has been following this path steadily for more than 20 years, since regaining independence.

Now is the time for the US and other members of the North Atlantic alliance to affirm that same vision by providing Georgia a path to NATO membership at the Wales Summit. Georgians expect that NATO will validate their commitments and achievements, and will offer Georgia an instrument that sets a clear path for membership in the alliance.

Meantime, NATO should also launch an enhanced cooperation initiative with Georgia consisting of practical tools and instruments to further enhance interoperability. Eventually, the deepened partnership will serve the goal of Georgia's full institutional integration with NATO.

Georgia's continued engagement under the NATO umbrella will not only help further strengthen Georgia's democratic institutions and enhance welfare of its people, but also increase stability and security in the region. Developments in and around Ukraine prompt that the stakes are too high for inaction. Now is the time for us all to work together to further deepen the U.S.-

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