



# United States partnerships with Georgia and Ukraine: Prospects for advancing military cooperation

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## About the author

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A spotlight has been cast over the Black Sea region for the past two decades. Located at the geopolitical junction of Western Europe, Russia, and the Middle East, the Black Sea littoral states have partnered with Western powers on global counterinsurgency and anti-terrorism efforts. Simultaneously, the Black Sea region continues to face insecurities triggered by enduring great power competition. The importance of stability in the Black Sea region has long been recognized by the West. However, this realization has not translated into a coherent regional strategy from NATO, nor any of its member states.

With their accession to NATO, three Black Sea littoral states (Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey) have been safeguarded under the Trans-Atlantic security umbrella. Georgia and Ukraine, both of which share common Euro-Atlantic aspirations, benefit only from the limited non-member opportunities provided within the NATO framework. The absence of a cohesive regional strategy is therefore most profoundly felt in the security environment of these two countries.

Georgia and Ukraine have made significant progress on defense and security reform. However, diverging political attitudes among NATO member states forces both countries to complement NATO aspirations with bilateral military partnerships that offer greater flexibility. The U.S. has assisted Georgia with state-building and democratization efforts since gaining its independence in 1991 and Georgia has proved a loyal partner in Iraq and Afghanistan. Unlike Georgia, Ukraine has attempted to balance relations with Russia and the West. However, the Revolution of Dignity and the Russian annexation of Crimea ended Ukraine's "negative strategic dependency" on Russia and paved the way for closer partnerships with the U.S., NATO, and the EU.<sup>1</sup>

This report seeks to understand the continuity and change in military cooperation between the U.S. and Georgia and the U.S. and Ukraine. Specifically, the report explores how conflict dynamics in Georgia and Ukraine have altered U.S. strategic priorities in the Black Sea region. The report conducts an overview and analysis of existing cooperation frameworks, culminating in a set of recommendations to advance U.S. interests in the region and ensure the security of Georgia and Ukraine.

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<sup>1</sup> Koval, Igor. "Russia Politics Toward Ukraine: was there ever a Strategic Partnership?" *Przegląd Strategiczny*. 2019.

## America's growing ties with Georgia and Ukraine

Relations between the U.S. and Georgia and Ukraine began with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and subsequent engagement with post-Socialist states to promote principles of democracy and market economy. The U.S. Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership was signed in December 2008 and the following month, so too was the U.S. Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership.

### Diverging political attitudes in Ukraine

Having inherited a large amount of Soviet military equipment, including the world's third-largest nuclear stockpile at the time, Ukraine found itself entangled between East and West as both sides sought to prevent the rise of nuclear capabilities in a volatile region.<sup>23</sup> In 1994, the Budapest Memorandum was signed by Ukraine, Russia, the U.S., and the UK.<sup>4</sup> In return for relinquishing its nuclear arsenal, Ukraine – along with Belarus and Kazakhstan – was given assurances that its sovereignty and territorial integrity would be respected by all signatories. That same year, with strong support from the Clinton Administration, Ukraine joined NATO's Partnership for Peace Program.<sup>5</sup> Since gaining independence, Ukraine has actively contributed to Euro-Atlantic security by participating in UN and NATO peace operations in the Balkans and Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, independent Ukraine's foreign policy has been incoherent due to divided public and political attitudes toward Russia and the West. In a 2014 USAID opinion poll, 44 percent of Ukrainians said their country should orientate toward Europe, 21 percent favored Russian relations, and 21 percent supported a balance between the two sides.<sup>7</sup> Former President Viktor Yanukovich's efforts to adopt a non-bloc status was another attempt by the Ukrainian leadership to avoid military alliances with either side.<sup>8</sup> The Revolution of Dignity in 2014 ousted the pro-Russian Yanukovich and demonstrated the

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<sup>2</sup> Olynyk, Stephen. "Ukraine as a Post-Cold War Military Power." Center for Counterproliferation Research National Defense University. 1997. <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a426799.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Olynyk, Kateryna. "The Destruction of Ukraine's Nuclear Arsenal." RFEL. January 09, 2019. <https://www.rferl.org/a/the-destruction-of-ukraines-nuclear-arsenal/29699706.html#:~:text=Twenty-five%20years%20ago%2C%20Ukraine.collapse%20of%20the%20Soviet%20Union>.

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7b65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7d/s\\_1994\\_1399.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7b65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7d/s_1994_1399.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> "Election 2020: The Future of U.S.-Black Sea Relations." Middle East Institute. October 2020.

<https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2020-10/Election%202020-%20The%20Future%20of%20U.S.-Black%20Sea%20Relations%20FINAL.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Ponomarenko, Illia. "45,000 Ukrainian troops participated in peacekeeping missions globally since 1992." Kyiv Post. May 29, 2019. <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/45000-ukrainian-troops-participated-in-peacekeeping-missions-globally-since-1992.html>

<sup>7</sup> "Public Opinion in Ukraine." USAID. 2014.

[https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/2014\\_ukraine\\_survey\\_presentation\\_slides\\_english.pdf](https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/2014_ukraine_survey_presentation_slides_english.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Kuzio, Taras. "Eight obstacles to Ukraine achieving peace with Russia." Atlantic Council. November 13, 2019.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/eight-obstacles-to-ukraine-achieving-peace-with-russia/>

Ukrainian people's aspiration toward closer and deeper relations with the EU and the West. Meanwhile, Russia's annexation of Crimea shed light on Moscow's real intentions toward Ukraine and radically altered Ukraine's threat perception. Immediately after the annexation, polling suggested attitudes toward Russia had hardened and interest in closer partnerships with Western countries and institutions had grown.<sup>9</sup> In fact, support for EU membership increased from 36 percent in 2012 to 59 percent in 2014.<sup>10</sup>

Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and the hybrid war in Donbas also shifted public opinion in favor of Western security organizations. In 2019, public support for NATO integration reached a peak of 53 percent.<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that support for Western institutions is highest in the Western and Central regions of Ukraine, while stronger pro-Russian sentiments are felt in the South and East of the country. With Ukraine's path to EU and NATO membership challenged by diverging political attitudes amongst member states, Kiev has recognized the U.S. as its primary bilateral security partner.

### **Georgia as a reliable security ally**

After gaining independence in 1991, Georgia was challenged by secessionist movements and civil war. However, at the end of the 20th century and after the relative consolidation of state institutions, Georgia's geostrategic location at the crossroads between East and West brought increased U.S. attention. Following the September 11 attacks, Georgia joined the Global War on Terror and in 2002, the U.S. initiated the Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP) which assisted Georgian security forces with internal terrorist threats in Pankisi Gorge.<sup>12</sup> A total of 2 300 Georgian troops have contributed to U.S.-led coalition forces in Iraq.<sup>13</sup>

Closer security cooperation with the U.S. encouraged Georgia's political leadership to follow other post-Socialist republics in seeking NATO integration. At the 2002 NATO Prague Summit, former President Eduard Shevardnadze officially declared Georgia's aspiration to become a NATO member.<sup>14</sup> Despite commitments made by the Alliance at the 2008 Bucharest Summit – as well as strong support from the U.S., Turkey, and Eastern European countries – Alliance members could not reach consensus on the

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<sup>9</sup> "Public Opinion Survey of Residents in Ukraine." International Republican Institute. April 3-12, 2014. <https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2014%20April%20Survey%20of%20Residents%20of%20Ukraine%2C%20April%203-12%2C%202014.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> "Public Opinion Survey of Residents in Ukraine." International Republican Institute. May 26 – June 10, 2018. [https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/june\\_2018\\_national\\_survey.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/june_2018_national_survey.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Grytsenko, Oksana. "Poll: NATO support grows in Ukraine, reaches 53 percent." Kyiv Post. July 9, 2019. <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/poll-nato-support-grows-in-ukraine-reaches-53-percent.html>

<sup>12</sup> McGregor, Andrew. "Ricin Fever" Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in the Pankisi Gorge." The Jamestown Foundation. May 5, 2005. <https://jamestown.org/program/ricin-fever-abu-musab-al-zarqawi-in-the-pankisi-gorge/>

<sup>13</sup> Tucker, Spencer E. The Encyclopedia of Middle East Wars: The United States in the Persian Gulf. 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Peuch, Jean-Christoph. "Georgia" Sheardnadze Officially Requests Invitation to Join NATO." RFE/RL. November 22, 2002. <https://www.rferl.org/a/1101463.html>

timing or process of Georgia's membership. This is challenging for many reasons, not least because since 2002, Georgia's relationship with the U.S. and been closely linked with Georgia's NATO integration process.

Following the Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia's contribution to international missions increased and strengthened with its participation in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. While Georgian international peacekeepers were called back to serve in the 2008 Russia-Georgia War, Georgia remained committed to its international responsibilities. Since 2004, Georgia has deployed more than 20 000 servicemen through ISAF and then later through the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission (RSM), becoming a leading non-member contributor.<sup>15</sup> Georgia has stayed a loyal partner to the U.S. in Iraq and Afghanistan through U.S.-led and NATO peacekeeping missions.

## Shifting U.S. policy in the Black Sea

Barack Obama's election as president in 2008 altered U.S. engagement with Georgia and Ukraine. The Obama Administration's foreign policy was characterized by a strategic rebalancing, most notably through the Russia 'Reset Policy' and pivot toward Asia.<sup>16</sup> Both policies resulted in decreased engagement with the Black Sea region. While the U.S. provided Georgia with \$1 billion for post-conflict reconstruction, Tbilisi has faced a "geostrategic downsizing" in Washington since 2009.<sup>18</sup> Russia's invasion of Georgia was not a sufficient catalyst for the U.S. to develop a more cohesive regional strategy, and President Obama refrained from selling Javelin anti-tank missile systems to Georgia following the 2008 war.<sup>20</sup>

This shift in America's strategic interests under Obama – combined with a cautious U.S. policy toward Russia and its neighborhood – failed to deter Russian aggression toward Ukraine. The annexation of Crimea and conflict in Donbas not only breached commitments made by Russia as a signatory of the Budapest Memorandum twenty years earlier, but U.S. credibility to deliver on its promises to its

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<sup>15</sup> <https://mod.gov.ge/ge/mission>

<sup>16</sup> Volker, Kurt. "No More Resets With Russia." Foreign Policy. August 11, 2020.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/11/no-more-resets-with-russia/>

<sup>17</sup> Lieberthal, Kenneth G. "The American Pivot To Asia." Brookings. December 21, 2011.

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>

<sup>18</sup> "Georgia: Background and U.S. Policy." Congressional Research Service. October 23, 2020.

<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45307.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Smolnik, Franziska. "The Strategic Partnership between Georgia and the United States: Vision Wanted." German Institute for International and Security Affairs. December 2020. [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research\\_papers/2020RP15\\_Georgia\\_UnitedStates.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2020RP15_Georgia_UnitedStates.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Cecire, Michael. "U.S.-Georgia Defense Talks Leave Tbilisi Smiling." World Politics Review. February 27, 2012.

<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/11597/u-s-georgia-defense-talks-leave-tbilisi-smiling>

partners was also tested. The conflict in Ukraine became a defining moment not only for U.S.-Ukrainian relations, but also for U.S. re-engagement with its partners in the region, including Georgia.

The shift in U.S. engagement is most notable in terms military aid, joint exercises and U.S. military presence, and arms sales.

## **Military aid**

The U.S. continues to be the main benefactor of the Ukrainian and Georgian defense sectors.<sup>21</sup> With the outbreak of the separatist conflict in Donbas, improving territorial defense capabilities became a key priority for Ukraine. Since 2014, U.S. military assistance to Ukraine has exceeded \$1.6 billion.<sup>22</sup> The U.S.-Ukrainian military partnership builds on the Ukraine Freedom Support Act 2014 and the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, helping Ukraine to increase resilience against further Russian and separatist aggression.

At the start of its partnership with the U.S., Georgia received substantial military assistance through Coalition Support Funds and the GTEP. Following the Russian annexation of Crimea, the U.S. began to complement NATO's counterinsurgency and anti-terrorism programs with an increased focus on improving Georgia's territorial defense capabilities. Between 2010 and 2019, Georgia received approximately \$265 million in military assistance from the U.S.<sup>23</sup> Through the Georgian Defense Readiness Program (GDRP) (2017-2021), the U.S. allocated \$35 million in assisting Georgia to improve combat readiness and prepare its force for national missions.<sup>24</sup> The military professionalism of the Georgian Defense Forces has significantly strengthened with U.S. bilateral assistance and Georgia's engagement in NATO's international training programs, exercises, and missions.

## **Joint exercises and military presence**

U.S. military presence in the Black Sea region is most visible in the form of temporary troop deployments for bilateral and multinational military exercises. With the Russian annexation of Crimea and subsequent militarization of the Black Sea coast, maritime security has advanced on the national and regional security agenda for Black Sea littoral states. The U.S.-Ukrainian led Rapid Trident and Sea

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<sup>21</sup> "Foreign Aid by Country." USAID. 2020. [https://explorer.usaid.gov/cd/UKR?fiscal\\_year=2020&measure=Obligations](https://explorer.usaid.gov/cd/UKR?fiscal_year=2020&measure=Obligations)

<sup>22</sup> Gould, Joe. "Here's what you need to know about the US aid package to Ukraine that Trump delayed." Defense News. September 25, 2019. <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2019/09/25/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-us-aid-package-to-ukraine-that-trump-delayed/>

<sup>23</sup> "Georgia: Background and U.S. Policy." Congressional Research Service. October 23, 2020. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45307.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Cooperation with the United States. Ministry of Defense of Georgia. <https://mod.gov.ge/en/page/119/cooperation-with-the-united-states>

Breeze exercises reaffirmed the importance of maritime security to Ukraine's national defense.<sup>25</sup> Two major annual military exercises, Agile Spirit and Noble Partner, have also been launched through the U.S.-Georgia defense cooperation. These exercises have evolved into multinational, brigade-level exercises involving land, air, sea, and cyber components. Joint annual exercises contribute to improved coordination and interoperability between partner states.

The participation of U.S. Army Europe in joint military exercises with Georgia and Ukraine, as well as the visit of U.S. Navy vessels to Black Sea ports, are of symbolic and operational importance. Large bilateral and multinational exercises not only facilitate exchange of knowledge and practice between partner states, but also support the development of host military infrastructure. The U.S. European Command's financial support to the Yavoriv Combat Training Center in Ukraine is has had a major impact on Ukraine's ability to train its forces for national and international missions.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to multinational exercises aimed at interoperability, the U.S. continues to assist both Ukraine and Georgia in advancing their territorial defense capabilities. Military training and exercises are planned in accordance with national defense needs. While maritime security is important for both Georgia and Ukraine, their naval capabilities differ significantly. After the war in 2008, the Georgian Coast Guard and Navy were integrated into one maritime force, the National Coast Guard, under the Ministry of Internal Affairs Border Police. As a result of the war in Donbas and annexation of Crimea, Ukraine lost access to one third of its coastline and defense facilities and equipment located in Crimea, and lost control of the Kerch Strait that connects the Sea of Azov to the Black Sea. Yet, unlike Georgia, Ukraine is committed to rebuilding its naval capabilities. U.S. naval assistance to both countries is therefore of utmost importance.

## Arms sales

While improved territorial defense capabilities has significantly strengthened national resilience toward hybrid threats, Georgia and Ukraine require additional capabilities to deter further Russian aggression. In response to Russia's aggression toward Ukraine in 2014, U.S. Congress authorized a commercial sale of lethal weapons through the Ukraine Freedom Support Act. However, President Obama refrained from trading lethal military equipment to both Georgia and Ukraine, fearing escalation of tensions with Russia. Donald Trump's presidency offered an opportunity for the U.S. to reassess its policy, culminating

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<sup>25</sup> "Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy." Congressional Research Service. April 29, 2020. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45008.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Gallagher, Stuart. "Mission Ukraine: U.S. Army Leads Multinational Training Group To Counter Russian Threat." Association of the United States Army. May 19, 2020. <https://www.ausa.org/articles/mission-ukraine-us-army-leads-multinational-training-group-counter-russian-threat>



in the sale of 400 Javelin portable anti-tank missiles with launchers to Georgia at an estimated cost of \$75 million in November 2017.

In 2018, the Trump Administration also approved the sale of 210 anti-tank Javelin missiles and 37 launching units to Ukraine worth \$47 million.<sup>27</sup> There are no restrictions on where these weapons can be deployed, however their use is limited to defense purposes only. It is worth noting the transfer of lethal weapons for defensive purposes does not hold as much of an operational value compared to its political significance. Nonetheless, Ukraine's acquisition of lethal weapons from the U.S. has made it costlier for Russian and separatist forces in Eastern Ukraine to escalate conflict. The U.S. has also increased support for Ukraine's naval capabilities and in November 2019, transferred two retired Coast Guard Island-class patrol boats to the Ukrainian Navy. Because Georgia's naval defense capabilities are limited to the National Coast Guard, U.S. maritime assistance to Georgia is outside current cooperation priorities.

These arms sale developments demonstrate that both Ukraine and Georgia enjoy strong bilateral support from U.S. Congress. However, relations between state leaders also matter.

## **Shortcomings of U.S. military strategy in the Black Sea**

Both Georgia and Ukraine have established themselves as reliable partners to the U.S. and NATO. However, it could be argued that the bilateral nature of the charters of strategic partnership has prevented the U.S. from developing a more coherent regional strategy – one that would lay the foundation for stronger convergence between Ukraine's and Georgia's Western integration.

The U.S. Georgia and U.S. Ukraine Charters of Strategic Partnership identify four core pillars: 1) Democracy and Governance; 2) Defense and Security; 3) Economic, Trade, and Energy Cooperation; and 4) People-to-people and Cultural Exchanges. At the NATO Bucharest Summit in 2008, Georgia and Ukraine were reassured by NATO that they would eventually become members of the Alliance.<sup>28</sup> This commitment was largely a result of U.S. efforts to bring two countries closer to the Alliance. However, despite similarities in the two charters, and U.S. support for both countries to integrate into NATO, strategic partnerships between the U.S. and Georgia and the U.S. and Ukraine are bilateral.

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<sup>27</sup> Miller, Christopher. "U.S. Confirms Delivery of Javelin Antitank Missiles to Ukraine." RFE/RL. April 30, 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/javelin-missile-delivery-ukraine-us-confirmed/29200588.html>

<sup>28</sup> "NATIO decisions on open-door policy." NATO News. April 3, 2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/javelin-missile-delivery-ukraine-us-confirmed/29200588.html>

## Successful U.S. engagement beyond the Black Sea

The U.S. has had more success with partnership charters with other Black Sea states and regions. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the U.S. has established enduring military partnerships in the Baltics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), the Visegrad Group (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), the Western Balkans, as well as Bulgaria and Romania through the NATO integration process. In addition to the Alliance's multinational frameworks, the U.S. has maintained bilateral military cooperation, complementing NATO security initiatives in these regions.

U.S. strategic charters with Baltic and Western Balkan states were part of U.S. efforts to support NATO enlargement. In addition to economic and security cooperation, the Baltic Charter of 1998 and the Adriatic Charter of 2002 (expanded in 2008) both affirmed U.S. commitment to supporting the integration of signatories into the Trans-Atlantic Alliance. All three Baltic and four Western Balkan signatories (with the exception of Bosnia Herzegovina) have already joined NATO.

With the establishment of the Joint Task Force East (JTFE) framework in 2005, resulting in the shared use of several military bases in Romania and Bulgaria, U.S. increased its presence in the Black Sea region.<sup>29</sup> And despite current tensions between the U.S. and Turkey, the former maintains access to air bases located in Izmir and Incirlik (the U.S. keeps 50 B61 nukes at the Incirlik airbase), signaling that regional security and counterterrorism remain top priorities for both countries.

U.S. support for the defense and security of its European allies strengthened in response to the Russian annexation of Crimea and conflict in Donbas. Intending to reassure European nations of America's commitment to Trans-Atlantic security, the Obama Administration launched the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI), transformed by the Trump Administration into the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI). The EDI has seen increased U.S. combat presence in Eastern Europe, additional military exercises with allies and partners, and improved equipment and infrastructure at U.S. airfields, bases, and training centers. The EDI has also helped bolster the capabilities of partner states. The U.S. is leading the NATO Enhanced Forward Presence Battle Group in Poland. Similar battle groups in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are led by the UK, Canada, and Germany respectively.

NATO's Tailored Forward Presence (TfP), made up of the Romanian-led multinational brigade, has improved the air defense capabilities of Bulgaria and Romania, enhanced Turkish maritime patrol in the Black Sea, and ensures the Alliance's commitment to security in its South-East territory. Through the TfP,

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<sup>29</sup> Moldovan, Dorinel. "Joint Task Force East and Shared Military Basing in Romania and Bulgaria." Georgia C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. September 2009. <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/occasional-papers/joint-task-force-east-and-shared-military-basing-romania-and-bulgaria-0>

NATO has increased the frequency of exercises and training in the region under the Headquarters Multinational Division Southeast in Romania.

NATO's Forward Presence in the North and Tailored Presence in the Southeast reaffirms the Alliance's and the U.S.'s unwavering commitment toward the security of the Baltics, Central Europe, and the Western part of the Black Sea region. However, despite demonstrated progress and unwavering commitment, both Georgia and Ukraine are left out of America's regional cooperation mechanisms.

### **Congressional support is not enough**

In light of the diverging threat perceptions of NATO member states, both Georgia and Ukraine view the U.S. as a more flexible and reliable partner against growing Russian influence in the region. In October 2020, the U.S. and Romania signed a ten-year road map for defense cooperation with a key focus on Black Sea security.<sup>30</sup> Unlike sustained efforts in the Baltic region and Central Europe, as well as in the Black Sea states of Romania and Bulgaria, the U.S. lacks a strategic vision toward Ukraine and Georgia. In contrast to the Trump Administration's record of deepening military partnerships with Central European states, the November 2020 visit of former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Tbilisi did not result in any changes to the existing military cooperation framework.<sup>31</sup>

It is true that both Georgia and Ukraine enjoy strong bilateral support within U.S. Congress. In the 'Countering Russian Influence in Europe and Eurasia Act of 2017,' Congress once again reaffirmed its support for the territorial integrity of Georgia and Ukraine, promising to never accept Russia's illegal occupation of Abkhazia, the Tskhinvali region, or Crimea. However, political statements and legal acts do not make up for the absence of a coherent U.S. Black Sea strategy. While the U.S. remains committed to Black Sea security through bilateral partnerships with littoral states, the presence of a more coherent strategy would promote regional consolidation and help Ukraine and Georgia present a stronger case for NATO membership.

### **The need for a coherent Black Sea strategy**

U.S. military cooperation with Georgia and Ukraine demonstrates the path dependencies. However, America's security strategy toward both countries fails to consider wider regional perspectives.

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<sup>30</sup> "U.S., Romania Chart 10-Year Road Map for Military Cooperation." U.S. Department of Defense. October 8, 2020. <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2376797/us-romania-chart-10-year-road-map-for-military-cooperation/>

<sup>31</sup> "Pompeo Due in Georgia For High-Level Talks Focused on Security." RFE/RL. November 17, 2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/pompeo-due-in-georgia-for-high-level-talks-focused-on-security/30954285.html>

America's track record of supporting partners through regional engagements indicates the potential for a more coherent Black Sea Strategy.

As both security providers and aid recipients, there is a complex interplay of expectations and strategic interests between Georgia and Ukraine on the one hand and Western partners on the other. Ongoing military aggression in Donbas and the recent reigniting of conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh are alarming reminders that protracted conflicts in the region continue to exacerbate insecurity, and that the situation in contested territories remain highly volatile.

By deploying 'peacekeepers' in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia has gained more leverage on top of its occupation of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions of Georgia, the annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing military aggression in Donbas.<sup>32</sup> Where Turkey and Russia have cemented their status as regional powers, the West has been distant from recent political and security developments in the Black Sea.<sup>33</sup> This increased Russian militarization, combined with inaction from Western powers, has been disappointing for Georgia and Ukraine – two states that consistently advocate for increased NATO, EU, and U.S. engagement.

With a change in administration, both Georgia and Ukraine have an opportunity to lobby for increased U.S. presence in the region. Based on America's existing military cooperation mechanisms with Georgia and Ukraine, as well as the opportunities offered in the U.S. strategic partnerships with other Central and Eastern European States, there are several policy recommendations to explore.

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<sup>32</sup> Losh, Jack. "Russian Troops in Nagorno-Karabakh "Clearly a Win for Moscow'." Foreign Policy. November 25, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/25/russian-troops-nagorno-karabakh-peacekeepers-win-moscow-armenia-azerbaijan/>

<sup>33</sup> Gabuev, Alexander. "Viewpoint: Russia and Turkey – unlikely victors of Karabakh conflict." BBC. November 12, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54903869>

## Policy recommendations

- **The U.S. should adopt a long-term, coherent strategy toward the Black Sea region which considers all littoral states and establishes cooperation mechanisms to ensure greater consolidation of the region.** Georgia and Ukraine already enjoy strong bilateral support from Congress. Ensuring both countries are given the same support under the Biden Administration will strengthen the case for Georgia and Ukraine to advance their partnership bilaterally as well as through NATO multinational frameworks. The U.S. should resolve existing differences with Turkey and encourage friendly Black Sea littoral states to advance their military cooperation with Georgia and Ukraine under regional security frameworks.
- **The U.S. should extend territorial defense capability building programs for Georgia and Ukraine,** spanning land, air, and sea operations. Re-building naval capabilities is a priority for Ukraine's national security, while Georgian maritime security is limited to the capabilities of the National Coast Guard. Georgia's increased focus on maritime security would also encourage security cooperation with Ukraine. However, a new military cooperation framework emphasizing Georgian deterrence capabilities, especially air and land, should remain a main priority.
- **The U.S. should sell more lethal weapons to deter further Russian aggression.** Since President Trump authorized the sale of anti-tank Javelin missile systems to both countries, any future refusals without significant cause could be regarded as strategic downsizing of Georgia and Ukraine in terms of U.S. foreign and security policy.
- **The Biden Administration should focus on renewing trust and confidence in the Trans-Atlantic community.** President Trump's strong stance on Alliance members not committing the minimum of 2 percent defense spending strained the U.S.-European bond. President Biden must convince all European Allies that the U.S. remains committed to multilateralism and Trans-Atlantic security. This renewed trust will also improve America's ability to lead new initiatives under the NATO framework, including a clear roadmap for NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine.
- **The U.S. should advocate for NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine, or at the very least for a Membership Action Plan.** To prevent Georgian and Ukrainian disillusionment and disengagement, it is important all member states recognize the efforts of both nations in achieving full interoperability with NATO standard operating procedures.
- **The U.S. should invite Georgia and Ukraine to contribute to the Forward Presence battle group in Poland.** America is a leading nation of this battle group and has committed to increasing its rotational forces in Poland in the coming years. At the same time, Poland has demonstrated unwavering support to Georgia's and Ukraine's integration into the EU and NATO. Moreover,

a Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian multinational brigade has existed since 2015 underlining the fraternal connection and cooperation in the military sphere. By inviting Georgia and Ukraine to contribute to the battle group, the U.S. will establish a precedent of a non-NATO member country participating in the Forward Presence Mission.

- **The U.S. should invite Georgia and Ukraine to contribute to the Black Sea Tailored Forward Presence.** This would not only enhance Black Sea security but would also promote cooperation between the littoral states and contribute to better regional consolidation.
- **The U.S. should continue promoting democracy and rule of law in both Georgia and Ukraine.** Regardless of democratic backsliding and increased populist discourses in Central European states, the U.S. partnership with Poland and Hungary has demonstrated that military interests are superior to political differences. Given America's reputation in Georgia and Ukraine, it must continue to stress the importance of democratic reforms while remaining committed to a "more for more" policy to avoid the possible disillusionment of Georgian and Ukrainian societies.

