

A Joint and Operational Approach for Security Assistance to Georgia and Ukraine

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After the breakup of the Soviet Union, both Ukraine and Georgia sought closer relationships with the West. In 1994, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) introduced the Partnership for Peace program to build relationships based on individual member state goals and preferences for cooperation, primarily with former Warsaw Pact adversaries.¹ Partnership for Peace eventually evolved into an entry point for European countries seeking a potential path toward NATO membership. Ukraine and Georgia were among the first to join, signing the framework document in February and March 1994, respectively.² Since joining Partnership for Peace, the two countries have participated in frequent multinational exercises and in NATO operations such as the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan and Operation Active Endeavour in the Mediterranean Sea.

As NATO expanded eastward after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia became increasingly concerned about loss of influence in their traditional sphere as a result of strategic envelopment by the Alliance.³ Russian ire came to a head in August 2008 with the campaign to support Russian separatists in

South Ossetia and again in 2014 after the fall of the pro-Russian Yanukovich government, which resulted in the Russian annexation of Crimea and subsequent support of separatists in eastern Ukraine. Russia has clearly decided that the Ukrainian and Georgian relationships with NATO are unacceptable to their strategic interests. Despite a NATO declaration at the 2008 Bucharest Summit that both Ukraine and Georgia would eventually become NATO members, their accession is unlikely for the foreseeable future.⁴ Russia's demonstrated willingness to engage in warlike activities is preventing this, as there is a prerequisite that requires its applicants to solve their internal conflicts before accession into NATO becomes an option.⁵

Nevertheless, Georgia and Ukraine remain key partners of the United States and NATO. Each has received tactical training and strategic advice on defense reform for many years, and the United States and NATO have both responded to Russian aggression with a deepening commitment to their long-time partners by enhancing security cooperation and increasing deterrence measures. However, while both Ukraine and Georgia have benefited from training assistance, improvements in



interoperability, and advice on institutional reform, there has been less emphasis in assistance to develop a joint force approach to campaign planning and execution capability at the operational level.

Ukraine and Georgia currently face a powerful Russian threat to their national stability that neither is fully prepared to address without substantial assistance. Now is the time to place at a higher priority training and assistance in joint- and operational-level competencies. An integrated joint approach to security cooperation focusing at the operational level with Ukraine and Georgia would strengthen those U.S. partners.

Some may argue that Ukraine and Georgia represent peripheral interests to the United States and do not warrant provoking Russia by providing them a higher level of security assistance and training. However, others assert that, while full NATO membership could risk provoking war with Russia, failure to support these key partners at this time will encourage further Russian aggression against weaker states and ultimately against the NATO alliance itself.⁶

Notwithstanding, while continued conflict and strategic tensions make NATO membership an impossibility

Members of the Ukrainian Armed Forces prepare a weapon at their position on the front line 25 November 2017 near the government-held town of Avdiyivka, Ukraine. (Photo by Oleksandr Klymenko, Reuters)

in the short term, the United States has a vital interest in continuing to build their defense capability and capacity to support their own national aspirations as well as a bulwark against aggression aimed at western Europe. As both countries are active contributors to U.S. and NATO operations, building their capacity strengthens U.S. and allied strategic depth by producing better military partners. To that end, placing greater emphasis on assistance in developing joint- and operational-level capabilities would help both countries provide more effectively for their own defense and reinforce deterrence against potential Russian aggression.

Strategic Context and Russian Strategy

As Russia slowly regained strength after the post-Soviet turmoil, perceived threats to its vital national

interests from NATO expansion drove Russian strategy development.⁷ For example, Russia protested that continued expansion of NATO into eastern Europe violated a negotiated agreement between former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev and former U.S. president George H. W. Bush. Additionally, Russia asserts that the Soviet Union agreed to allow German reunification on the condition that NATO would not expand east, an agreement it felt was binding even with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.⁸ However, once the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact dissolved, with no binding legal authority to prevent increased membership, countries such as Poland, Romania, and the Baltic States hurried to join the Alliance.

Until 2014, NATO and Russia maintained a semi-cooperative relationship through mechanisms such as the NATO-Russia Council.⁹ But, Russian perceptions of Western influence during the 2014 Euromaidan protests in Ukraine and NATO reaction to the subsequent Russian actions in Crimea tipped the dynamic, effectively ending any pretense that the NATO-Russia relationship

was moving in a productive direction.¹⁰

Russian strategy became evident with the annexation of Crimea, though it should have been clear from at least 2008 considering Russian aggression in Georgia. These actions are indicative of Russia's strategic

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objectives. First, Russia seeks to regain its role as a leading global power after years of reduced stature following the Soviet dissolution; second, Russia aims to check NATO encroachment on its territorial boundaries and sphere of influence; third, Russia claims as a pretext the right to protect the greater Russian-speaking community outside its borders—the so-called “near abroad”—mainly resident in many eastern European states that border Russia; and finally, Russia aims to maintain control of the Black Sea to secure resource flows and access to the Mediterranean Sea.¹¹

Russia's 2008 incursion into South Ossetia and de facto control of Abkhazia within Georgia were also a logical implementation of its strategy to check NATO enlargement under the guise of protecting Russian-speaking people. The operation in South Ossetia employed hybrid tactics and overwhelmed unprepared Georgian forces. Caught largely unprepared to deal with the Russian aggression, the United States and NATO were unable to provide lethal assistance to Georgia without stepping too close to entering into direct conflict with Russia.

Over the last decade, to refine its approach to achieving its strategic objectives, Russia has significantly modified its military doctrine and concepts of employment. Following the Russian intervention in

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South Ossetia in August 2008, the Russian government identified the need to transform its military into a leaner, more mobile, more capable force that would be able to rapidly respond to local and regional crises. It required a better-equipped and better-trained force able to conduct joint operations across all domains. In some respects, this mirrored U.S. military strategy.¹²

Subsequently, Russia's operational concept employed what Russian military officials term *new type warfare*, which integrates conventional means with irregular warfare, covert action, cyberspace attacks, electronic warfare, and influence operations to achieve effects.¹³ The Russian invasion and subsequent annexation of Crimea with minimal bloodshed demonstrated Russian ability to successfully employ this hybrid strategy.¹⁴

In 2014, following the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine and the collapse of the Russian-favored Yanukovich government, Russia employed hybrid tactics to invade and ultimately annex Crimea. Considering the Western preference of the new Ukrainian government, the threat of losing its lease of the naval base in Sevastopol, set to expire in 2017, was one of several factors in the Russian decision to seize

An instructor with the Armed Forces of Ukraine (*center*) throws a smoke grenade on top of a BTR-80 armored personnel carrier 27 July 2015 as Ukrainian soldiers conduct convoy operations training during Rapid Trident in Yavoriv, Ukraine. Rapid Trident is a long-standing U.S. Army Europe-led cooperative training exercise focused on peacekeeping and stability operations. More than 1,800 personnel from eighteen different nations participated in the exercise. (Photo by Sgt. Alexander Skripnichuk, U.S. Army)

Crimea.¹⁵ As a precursor to Russian action, unidentifiable armed forces, referred to as "little green men," created an atmosphere of ambiguity to obscure attribution and prevent a coherent response from NATO and the Western international community.¹⁶

Subsequently, in eastern Ukraine, Russian-supported "separatists" conducted an insurrection in the Donbas region, again relying on ambiguity to obscure Russian responsibility. In this region, Russia displayed an ability to employ a hybrid strategy while dominating in all domains, denying Ukraine the ability to respond effectively with air and maritime forces.¹⁷ Ukrainian land forces could only achieve a stalemate on the ground, leading to



a state of “frozen conflict” that further served the Russian goal to frustrate Ukraine’s aspirations for NATO membership. Russia’s demonstrated improvement in operating as a joint force between 2008 and 2014 and a willingness to use aggression to achieve its strategic goals highlights the need to build joint and operational capacity in Georgia and Ukraine so that they might more effectively respond to future threats.

U.S. and NATO Programs for Ukraine and Georgia

With Russian aggression in Ukraine and its increasingly assertive posture in the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the United States reinvigorated defense commitments to Europe and NATO. During speeches in Poland and Estonia in 2014, President Barack Obama emphasized U.S. commitment to the NATO alliance and defense of allies.¹⁸ While the U.S. priority was to strengthen the Alliance, the 2015 U.S. *National Security Strategy* also included security of partners as a priority.¹⁹ The 2017 *National Security Strategy* reinforces the U.S. relationships with allies, partners, and aspiring partners, saying “allies and

Soldiers from a Georgian infantry company, which is part of the NATO Response Force, stand in formation 27 August 2017 during a ceremony to open the Joint Training and Evaluation Centre at the Krtsanisi Military Facility in Tbilisi, Georgia. NATO established the center to facilitate security cooperation. (Photo courtesy of NATO)

partners magnify our power” and “are a great strength of the United States.” While the 2017 NSS emphasizes the need for allies and partners to carry their “fair share of the burden of responsibility to protect against common threats,” continued security cooperation and assistance with key partners such as Ukraine and Georgia will develop their ability to share more of the burden.²⁰ The United States has no formal treaty obligations to defend non-allied partners such as Georgia. Although the 1994 Budapest Memorandum regarding removal of nuclear weapons from Ukraine guarantees its security from nuclear attack by the signatories, as a non-NATO member, Ukraine is not entitled to collective defense under Article V of the Washington Treaty.²¹ Support since 2014 has been primarily diplomatic and economic, with military support limited to nonlethal aid, training,

and exercises.²² The U.S. approach has been a balance of deterrence through military cooperation and demonstration of allied military capability through exercises.

NATO's response to Russian aggression in Ukraine began in 2014 with establishment of the Readiness Action Plan (RAP), with its centerpiece of expansion and heightened readiness of the NATO Response Force (NRF). The RAP also included "assurance" of NATO members, mainly in the form of exercises that nearly always included non-NATO partner nations (e.g., Ukraine and Georgia).²³ While NATO activity has been robust, the approach in terms of assistance and support to partners directly facing the Russian threat has been more measured and cautious in order to avoid miscalculation and unnecessary provocation.

Ukraine. In 1997, NATO and Ukraine signed a charter for a "distinctive partnership." After the 2004–2005 "Orange Revolution" resulted in a more Western-leaning government following popular protests against electoral fraud, Ukraine became seriously interested in NATO cooperation and started on a path toward membership in 2008.²⁴ Subsequently, Ukraine has been an active contributor to NATO operations and exercises, including in Afghanistan, and was the first partner nation to contribute troops to the NRF.²⁵

Col. Volodymyr Postrybailo of the Ukrainian army, writing for the Strategic Studies Institute's *Project 1721*, described the state of the Ukraine Armed Forces (UAF) in 2014 and the challenges it faced then and subsequently. After the departure of the Yanukovich government, Ukraine was unprepared for a military confrontation with a superior Russian threat and an enemy employing hybrid warfare. Deficiencies in joint capability were and continue to be a major factor:

The conflict has already revealed many gaps in Ukrainian doctrines and concepts, mistakes made during planning and execution of combat missions, and shortages in a number of joint functions that could have been avoided and overcome if the UAF had utilized the best practices and experience of the NATO countries' armies prior to the conflict.²⁶

Postrybailo further explained that the fight was primarily in the land and cyber domains. Russian and separatist air defenses effectively limited Ukraine's air power to medical evacuation and transport, while the loss of Crimea severely curtailed Ukraine's naval

capability.²⁷ He described the transformation of the Ukraine military, including the creation of a joint operational staff, crediting NATO training and exercises for helping the UAF achieve improved tactical capability. He further suggested that to address the gaps in joint functions, successes in tactical training must extend to the operational and strategic levels.²⁸

Since 2014, the NATO-Ukraine Commission, the forum for Alliance assistance to Ukraine, established two trust funds, later expanded to six, for institution building and assistance to Ukraine.²⁹ In July 2016, the commission announced the establishment of the Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) for Ukraine.³⁰ The CAP focuses on security structures, oversight, economic reforms, and some nonlethal technical assistance, but it does not directly address operational-level capabilities and joint functions. A key gap remains.

The United States has been active in support of Ukraine bilaterally as well as through NATO. In a July 2014 Senate panel, Victoria Nuland, then assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, outlined U.S. policy toward Ukraine including political, economic, and security challenges in diplomatic efforts to deescalate the crisis with targeted sanctions on Russia and separatists, and loan guarantees.³¹ However, while United States policy makers expressed an urgent and strong desire to help Ukraine, they expressed a perceived and real risk of direct confrontation with Russia and therefore the President tempered calls for lethal assistance during the first three years of the conflict.³²

Practical assistance began in 2014–2015 with the Global Security Contingency Fund for Ukraine, a joint Department of State and Department of Defense provision of nonlethal aid (mainly materiel).³³ The U.S. European Command subsequently established the Joint Military Training Group for Ukraine in 2015, in partnership with the Canadian Armed Forces, to provide training to Ukraine land forces and to provide advice on strengthening institutions.³⁴ Beginning with training of the Ukraine National Guard, the program based at the Yavoriv International Peacekeeping Center continues to train regular Ukraine land forces in tactical skills as well as battalion-level staff planning and execution.³⁵ To date, no similar program exists for Ukraine's air and maritime forces, and no significant effort has been made to integrate multi-domain forces at the operational level.

With the repeated failure of ceasefires and conflict resolution efforts in eastern Ukraine, there were calls in Congress to authorize lethal aid. Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe and commander of the U.S. European Command, in his March 2017 testimony to the House Armed Services Committee, gave his advice regarding the need for “lethal defensive weapons” for Ukraine to counter modern Russian equipment by further explaining that Ukraine needs additional training, equipping, government capacity building, and security (institution) building.³⁶ President Donald Trump authorized the provision of lethal defensive weapons, including Javelin antitank missiles, to Ukraine in late December 2017.³⁷ While the lethal defensive aid addresses a tactical capability gap, a long-term approach to building partner capacity should focus on organic institutions and force generation capacity that allows Ukraine to sustain its own defense in the long term. The approach should incorporate cross-domain planning and coordination, and integration of operational-level air and cyber forces with ground maneuver.

Georgia. Cooperation between Georgia and NATO grew substantially after the 2003 “Rose Revolution,” a peaceful uprising against corruption and fraud in the presidential election. After a new election, Georgia moved for greater reform and alignment with the West.³⁸ A regular contributor to the NRF, Georgia was among the largest contributors to the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan and continues as part of the Resolute Support Mission.³⁹

The NATO-Georgia Commission formed in September 2008 to provide political consultations and to assist Georgia in its goals to achieve NATO membership. Another purpose of the commission was to help Georgia recover from the August 2008 conflict with Russia in South Ossetia.⁴⁰ At the 2014 Summit in Wales, NATO reaffirmed the commitment to strengthening Georgia’s ability to defend itself and further approved an assistance package at the 2016 Warsaw Summit.⁴¹ The “Substantial NATO-Georgia Package” (SNGP) includes measures to strengthen Georgia’s defense capabilities, increase security cooperation, and improve interoperability at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels.⁴² The SNGP includes strategic-level advice and liaison, defense-capacity building, training, multinational exercises, and enhanced interoperability opportunities.⁴³

Operational planning focused on combat and crisis management using NATO’s operational planning processes is also part of the package, though so far, “operational” planning has been a brigade-level program.⁴⁴ Further highlighting Georgia’s status as a high-priority partner, NATO established the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Centre in 2015 to facilitate security cooperation.⁴⁵

The U.S. bilateral partnership with Georgia includes frequent exercises and training opportunities linked to NATO-Georgia programs. The United States and Georgia signed a “Charter on Strategic Partnership” in January 2009 covering multiple areas, including defense and security.⁴⁶ The United States maintains support for Georgian aspirations for NATO membership. In 2016, Dr. Michael Carpenter, then deputy assistant secretary of Defense, signed a three-year security cooperation framework with Georgia that includes training and equipping in conjunction with the NATO SNGP.⁴⁷

The United States and Georgia participate in multiple annual exercises including Exercise Noble Partner to increase U.S.-Georgian interoperability and preparation for the NRF duties. In recent years, Exercise Noble Partner has included demonstrations of mechanized, airborne, and marine forces.⁴⁸ The Black Sea Rotational Force under Marine Forces Europe conducts occasional training with the Georgian Armed Forces throughout the year, most notably the Agile Spirit series of exercises. The Black Sea Rotational Force and U.S. Army National Guard troops from Georgia’s state partner, the U.S. state of Georgia, help to prepare and certify Georgian units for deployment to Afghanistan for Resolute Support Mission.⁴⁹ In the maritime domain, the United States regularly conducts port visits and maritime training with Georgia and other Black Sea states. Black Sea port visits, training, and patrols enhance maritime security and the naval capability of partners in the region such as Georgia.⁵⁰ In the air domain, however, limitations to exercises reflect caution related to Russian air defense threats and risk of miscalculations.

Several key NATO exercises with U.S. participation and support are designed to improve Georgian Armed Forces capability and interoperability. The first exercise under the SNGP was Agile Spirit 2015, which changed focus from counterinsurgency in previous years to a conventional focus.⁵¹ NATO-Georgia Exercise 2016 included an operational-level focus with the Georgian General



Staff and a multinational brigade headquarters leading a crisis response scenario.⁵² This type of exercise is a step in the right direction, though much more remains to be done to achieve joint integration and operational-level campaign planning and execution.

As with Ukraine, the U.S. partnership with Georgia tends to heavily focus on tactical-level training. The NATO SNGP and establishment of the Joint Training and Evaluation Centre are positive steps toward improving institutional capacity and joint capabilities. The SNGP recognizes the need for the operational-level development, but that is only beginning to take shape. Georgia would benefit from a more integrated joint approach to combined exercises including further development at the operational level. Future exercises should incorporate multiechelon training and begin with planning academics, crisis action planning drills, and command-post exercises to train and certify joint staffs in operational level planning.

Considering A Way Ahead

The objective of U.S. and NATO programs should be to develop partners that are interoperable and able to

Georgian soldiers from the NATO Response Force keep a lookout 17 May 2015 during an urban warfare training exercise that included units from the 173rd Airborne Brigade and the Georgian 1st Infantry Brigade as part of Exercise Noble Partner in Vaziani, Georgia. Noble Partner is a combined U.S. Army Europe-Georgian army exercise designed to increase interoperability between Georgia's contribution to the NATO Response Force and allied militaries. (Photo by Sgt. A. M. LaVey, U.S. Army)

contribute to Alliance and coalition operations, as well as provide for their own defense. Doctrinal and procedural interoperability must extend from the tactical to the operational level. This necessitates an ability to plan and execute campaigns with joint-capable command-and-control structures. Developing joint and operational capabilities requires dedicated efforts to improve joint force integration, joint staff training and development, and operational level institution building.

Joint force integration must be emphasized along three operational axes: air-land integration, combined special operations forces and conventional integration, and integration of cyber into offensive and defensive operations. Operational campaign planning along these three

axes allows development of integrated objectives and combined-force employment for better interoperability with U.S. and NATO forces. Developing cross-domain operational-level planning competency requires dedicated training, education, and active participation by Ukrainian and Georgian forces in campaign planning activities.

Training and education programs should be enhanced to focus on operational planning and execution in national-level joint staffs and developing joint-capable headquarters. The CAP, Joint Military Training Group for Ukraine, the NATO SNGP, and exercises such as Exercise Noble Partner are steps in the right direction; however, when looking to the future, NATO and U.S. initiatives need to develop assistance plans that better incorporate joint and operational skill development. Existing programs requiring enhancement include mobile training teams; military-to-military engagements; institutional advising and liaison; intermediate, advanced, and senior service school exchanges; and use of the International Military Education and Training Program. This will require reviewing and creating new curriculum, programs of instruction and lesson plans, and applying the right expertise to deliver training and advice.

Beyond training and education, the U.S. and NATO should make a concerted effort to build institutions through exercises and evaluations, building on recent steps in this direction. This requires operational-level staff participation in NATO and other multinational exercises and operations. In the short-term, individual staff officers could participate in NATO multinational exercises to gain experience as they develop their own collective capability. U.S. and NATO forces must evaluate participation and provide meaningful feedback that includes measurable schedules and milestones to monitor progression.

The U.S. and NATO's ability to deliver training, education, and advice at the operational level will face challenges. Synchronization of operational maneuver and the ability to integrate joint capabilities in a

coherent campaign is something that even the best militaries have to work hard at to do well. The requisite expertise to train partners in operational planning and execution is not plentiful and usually resides in combatant command or other major command staffs, with the majority not dedicated to training, exercises, or other security cooperation activities.

Subject-matter experts capable of leading training are low-density, high-demand assets whose own organizations are often reluctant to part with for "secondary" security cooperation tasks—namely planners, strategists, joint-fires-qualified experts, and other joint doctrine and technical experts. The United States needs to manage the joint and operational expertise closely to leverage the right expertise at the right time while not levying an undue burden on owning organizations. But, for partnerships with Ukraine and Georgia to progress, this is necessary.

Conclusion

Ukraine and Georgia are on the front lines of strategic competition. While the United States and NATO have provided robust tactical training and strategic development over the last twenty years, there is a gap in joint training and development at the operational level. The U.S. and NATO security assistance to these geopolitically key nations contributes to deterrence of Russia while improving the interoperability and capability of important partners. An integrated joint approach to security cooperation focusing at the operational level will strengthen Ukraine and Georgia and serve as an appropriate deterrent to Russian aggression. A joint approach to partnership programs would significantly enhance the defense capability and interoperability of Ukraine and Georgia to participate in NATO operations and exercises. Expanding combined, joint interoperability at the operational level should be the next critical focus of our partnerships. ■

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In an ongoing effort to focus interest, research, and informed discussion on a discrete number of geographical areas or emerging topics of priority national security concern, the Army University Press (AUP) has established and is continuing to develop a website on which it aggregates AUP publications together with selected publications from other sources germane to each topic or area. The two purposes of this site are to provide readers with an overview of issues related to the topics or areas about which AUP authors have written thus far; and, to encourage prospective authors to contribute additional articles or larger studies to the collection. To view this website, visit <http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Special-Topics/Hot-Topics/>.

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- Russia
- Russia-Syria
- Russia-Ukraine
- Islamic Jihad-Europe
- North Korea
- China-Indochina
- Islamic State and al-Qaida in Africa
- Saudi Arabia and Iran conflict
- U.S.-Mexican border security
- India-Pakistan

Hot Topics

- Illegal immigration globally
- Urban warfare
- New extended battlefield (multidimensional war)
- Countering weapons of mass destruction
- Impact of gender inequality on operations and stability

