
Bush's parting gift to Georgia

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Among its final foreign policy acts before leaving office, the Bush administration earlier this month signed a strategic partnership agreement with Georgia that commits the United States to promoting that nation's membership in NATO despite European and Russian objections.

The agreement, signed in Washington on Jan. 9, confirmed America's support for Georgia's territorial integrity and promises to help rebuild the nation's army, which was largely decimated over the summer when it clashed with Russian forces over the status of South Ossetia.

"This is a historic day for my country," said Georgia's foreign minister, Grigol Vashadze. "The Charter ... strengthens the close strategic partnership between Georgia and the United States, and stresses that the countries signing this legal document share a vital interest in a strong, prosperous, independent, sovereign, and territorially integral Georgia."

Washington's European allies may be less than enthused about America's commitment to Georgia. After last summer's conflict with Russia, many European capitals made it clear they were reluctant to extend security guarantees to the regime in Tbilisi.

Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili, on the other hand, sees the latest document as a breakthrough in U.S.-Georgian relations.

"The term 'strategic partner' has never been used (with respect to Georgia) before. America has used this word very rarely and with regard to a very limited number of countries. To them, the term has always had a very concrete political meaning," Saakashvili said.

"Although this is a difficult process full of contradictions, and we still have a long way to go, this is indisputably a step bringing Georgia closer to the NATO and Euro-Atlantic space, a new important stage," he said.

Saakashvili appears confident that the new administration in Washington will honor its predecessor's pledge.

"I had a very positive conversation with (President) Obama just days after his election, and I am pleased that he is a very active supporter of Georgia, knows the problems of the region well and has an opinion on every issue," Saakashvili said.

While the agreement focuses mainly on military issues, it also takes a swipe at what many have increasingly come to see as Saakashvili's authoritarian form of government.

For example, the document requires Georgia "to bolster independent media, freedom of expression and access to objective news and information, including ... assistance to journalists and media outlets," as well as "to strengthen further the rule of law, including by increasing judicial independence."

Georgia's international reputation took something of a hit earlier this month when the Washington-based think tank Freedom House removed it from its list of electoral democracies.

Despite that, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had high praise for the Saakashvili government.

"Our relationships rest, of course, on shared values of democracy, on security, on economic prosperity," she said at the signing ceremony. "And this charter underscores the principles and outlines a way to advance our relationship and our cooperation in defense, trade, energy security, strengthening democratic institutions, people-to-people contacts and cultural exchanges."

Archil Gegeshidze, an analyst with the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Research, described the document as a very important step toward Georgia's integration in the West, although he noted that "reading between the lines in the charter, one can read certain conditions being laid down to Georgia." The agreement "is not a panacea and, unlike NATO membership, does not give any security guarantees," Gegeshidze said. Still, it appears to put Washington fully in Georgia's corner.
