
US signs strategic partnership pact with Georgia

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U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice signed a strategic partnership charter with Georgia on Friday that her Georgian counterpart called a "stepping stone" to Tbilisi's eventual membership in NATO.

The agreement to cooperate in defense, trade, energy security, cultural exchanges and strengthening democratic institutions would help bind the former Soviet republic to the West just months after Georgia's brief war with Russia, Georgian and U.S. officials said.

"This is the stepping stone which will bring Georgia to Euro-Atlantic structures, to membership within NATO, and to return to the family of Western and civilized nations," said Georgian Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze.

Rice said the pact underscored U.S. support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and its goal of integrating with Europe through NATO and other groupings.

Moscow has opposed the expansion of NATO to include Georgia and Ukraine and some European members of the alliance have resisted U.S. efforts to extend membership to those ex-Soviet states.

"The pace of Georgia's integration with NATO should depend on the desires of Georgians themselves and on Georgia's ability to meet NATO standards," Rice said.

Russian troops overwhelmed Georgia's military in a brief war in August that sparked international condemnation. Moscow said it sent troops and tanks to defend South Ossetia from Georgia's bid to retake the rebel region by force.

The Georgian breakaway territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia were "facing brutal Russian occupation," said Vashadze. He told reporters that U.S. help in bolstering Georgia's economy, democracy and defense would quicken "the day when the last Russian soldier leaves Georgia."

The minister added, "This document is not directed against anybody, but it's a very powerful signal."

Under the charter, Georgia would get U.S. help in modernizing its military through training and equipment, postwar reconstruction assistance, support for financial and economic reforms, and expanded access to the U.S. market for Georgian goods.

"For a small country which just finished a war, opening up the American market is an absolutely vital thing," said Vashadze, who voiced confidence the incoming Obama administration would maintain U.S. support for Georgia.
