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"Georgia-Russia Crisis, Implications and U.S. Response"

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member McCain, Members of this Committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Georgia-Russia conflict and its implications for security in the region.

We are here today to discuss a conflict that many of us hoped would be avoided. Regrettably, however, despite intensive, long-standing diplomatic efforts on the part of the Administration to reduce tensions in the region, serious conflict did ultimately break out between Russia and Georgia the evening of August 7, leading to a significantly disproportionate response by Russia, its military invasion of a sovereign country, and its effort to undermine the democratically-elected leadership of one of its neighbors.

Russia's subsequent decision to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states was an additional misguided step aimed at challenging the territorial integrity of Georgia.

All of these developments are deeply troubling, have called into question Russia's reliability as a partner, and pose serious challenges for Russia's neighbors, the United States and our European Allies.

In response to the current crisis, U.S. policy is to: 1) Support Georgia's people, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity; 2) Support our Allies in the region, who feel threatened by Russian aggression; and 3) Demonstrate to Russia that its aggressive actions do not serve its national interest, will not be tolerated, and will not be cost free.

I will seek today to outline some of the many challenges we face, describe how the current crisis developed, what we did to try to prevent it, and how we ought to proceed in responding to and reassessing our relationship with Russia.

Let me begin by making it clear: the United States, despite Russia's recent actions, does not seek a new Cold War.

As Secretary Gates has said on a number of occasions, one was enough. We have never seen our activities in the region as a 19th century contest with Russia for "influence." Nor do we believe the Eurasian space should be subject to any external sphere of influence. All countries – the countries of the South Caucasus, Russia, and the transatlantic community – would benefit from a set of benign relations among all the players, great and small.

We have spent 18 years working with the countries of the region, with Russia, and with our western European allies to promote mutual cooperation in the region. Three U.S. Administrations throughout this period have also worked hard to support Russia's stated goal of integration into major Western institutions.

We are now at a crossroads. In light of recent developments, Russia must now decide how it wants to define its future relationship with the international community.

Russia's recent actions have already diminished its standing in the world and have led to its growing isolation.

The international community has resolutely rejected Russian aggression. Russia's future actions, including those it takes in the coming weeks and months in Georgia, will continue to define how it is viewed in the world and how the world defines and moves forward with Russia. We hope that on sober reflection Russia will choose a different path, but our policy will respond appropriately to Russian actions.

We will continue to work with our Western Allies and international partners to seek solutions for resolving the current crisis. U.S. resolve and cooperation with Europe has been a bedrock of the Euro-Atlantic security structure for decades. We are also consulting with our European friends as we consider options for responding to Russia's actions and begin the process of reassessing our relations with Russia.

And, we will pursue opportunities stemming out of the current crisis to build a stronger and more capable Euro-Atlantic alliance able to meet the range of 21st century challenges.

Our relationship with Russia has been an important focus for this Administration and we have consistently sought to work with Russia on a wide range of areas of mutual interest. President Bush's commitment to a partnership with Russia has been based on a realistic assessment of these common interests, evidenced earlier this year by the Strategic Framework Declaration agreed to in Sochi, which was envisioned to be the basis for long-term cooperation on a wide range of strategic interests.

While U.S. strategic interests dictate that we should keep the door open to the possibility of future cooperation with Russia along the lines we hoped for at Sochi, we should also remain open to the possibility that Russian intentions may not be what we understood them to be and that Russia may not, in the near-term at least, step back from its current course. This will demand patience and an ongoing commitment to stand firm in defense of our interests and those of our friends and Allies in the region.

WAR BREAKS OUT

August was a volatile month in South Ossetia. After tit-for-tat attacks in South Ossetia in late July and early August, including roadside bomb detonations against South Ossetian authorities and an assassination attempt against the leader of the Georgian-backed provisional government in South Ossetia on July 3, South Ossetian and Georgian forces exchanged fire repeatedly during the week of August 4.

This shelling increased substantially on August 5-6, as South Ossetian separatist forces trained their artillery on Georgian villages to the south and north of the separatist capital. A Georgian peacekeeping armored personnel carrier was destroyed on August 7.

With fire constant from the South Ossetian side, Georgia sent its Reintegration Minister to South Ossetia for talks and President Saakashvili announced a unilateral cease-fire on August 7.

Despite the cease-fire, Georgia asserted that the South Ossetians continued shelling Georgian peacekeepers and villages, even from behind positions occupied by Russian peacekeepers. Despite their mandate, Russian 'peacekeepers' did not fulfill their duty to stop the exchange of shelling between both sides.

That night, the Georgians announced that they were compelled to protect their citizens and began to suppress South Ossetian firing positions with ground operations. Georgia expanded operations, shelling the city of Tskhinvali. A Georgian ground operation quickly captured separatist controlled villages and much of the city of Tskhinvali.

The Georgian leadership's decision to employ force in the conflict zone was unwise. Although much is still unclear, it appears the Georgians conducted what they thought was a limited military operation with the political aim of restoring Georgian sovereignty over South Ossetia to eliminate the harassing fire from the South Ossetian separatists on Georgian civilians.

This operation was hastily planned and implemented.

The use of artillery fire and multiple launched rockets into urban areas and into the proximity of Russian peacekeepers is lamentable, and we do not condone this activity.

Russia used Georgia's ground operation as the pretext for its own offensive. Sweeping Georgian forces out of Tskhinvali, Russia quickly carried the operation into undisputed Georgian territory. Russia's two-pronged assault, deploying forces not only through South Ossetia, but also into Abkhazia by land, as well as by sea and air, resulted in the retaking of all of South Ossetia, and the Georgian controlled Upper Kodori gorge in the Abkhazia region. This combined arms military operation used Russian conventional, airborne, and special forces based in the North Caucasus Military District, as well as Airborne troops from Pskov and Ivanovo; naval forces from the Black Sea Fleet; irregular forces – South Ossetians, Cossacks and Chechens; and special forces.

Within hours of Georgia's moves into South Ossetia, thousands of hardened Russian combat troops and hundreds of tanks, vehicles and dozens of planes were flooding into South Ossetia and conducting air and missile strikes into Georgian areas controlled by Tbilisi. Within days, Russian troops moved without hesitation into undisputed Georgian territory.

From the beginning of the conflict, Russian defense officials told senior Department of Defense officials that Russia's aims were limited to protecting its citizens and peacekeepers and removal of Georgian forces from their post-August 6 positions. What became clear is there never seemed to be a limit to Russia's operational – nor strategic – aims.

It is clear that Russia's political and military leadership executed a pre-planned operation to forcibly and quickly change the status quo in Georgia.

HISTORY OF U.S. MILITARY ASSISTANCE

Prime Minister Putin has tried to lay blame on the U.S. for "arming the Georgians to the teeth", but the Georgian armed forces were never trained and or equipped by the U.S. to fight the Russians.

Georgia has been a partner in the Global War on Terrorism since September 2001. In 2002, in response to Russian accusations that Georgia was harboring Chechen rebels in the lawless, mountainous border region of the Pankisi Gorge, the U.S. initiated the Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP), which sought to provide Georgia's security services with assistance in securing internal threats. This program implemented President Bush's decision to respond to the Government of Georgia's request for assistance to enhance its counter-terrorism capabilities and address the situation in the Pankisi Gorge. This program was conducted openly and discussed in public documents.

As the Georgian armed forces matured, it became obvious GTEP would need to evolve.

The follow-on program, the Georgian Sustainment & Stability Operations Program (GSSOP), trained and equipped Georgian forces and command staff for peace support operations in Iraq. Three Georgian brigades were trained through the Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP) and the two Sustainment & Stability Operations Programs (SSOPs).

The purpose of all follow-on programs to GTEP was to support Georgia's deployments to Iraq. SSOP and SSOP II included significant training for combat support and combat service support units, which allowed the three trained brigades to sustain themselves, have a higher degree of NATO interoperability, and be able to operate at the brigade level. In the summer of 2007, Georgia deployed a brigade of 2,000 personnel to Iraq, making it the 3rd largest troop contributor and increasing its previous 858-person commitment there. Approximately $64M was expended to support Georgia's GTEP. Subsequently, approximately $124.2M in Coalition Support funds was used to reimburse Georgia in support of SSOP, SSOP II and the latest deployment of Georgia's brigade to Iraq.

Prior to the outbreak of hostilities, the U.S. was undergoing initial military training of Georgia's 4th Brigade for its eventual deployment to Iraq in Winter 2008. The Brigade was being trained with funds apportioned by the Georgian government, which the U.S. would eventually have reimbursed. Approximately $35 million was to have been budgeted for this effort.

Georgia has been the highest per capita contributor of troops to the War on Terror. To date, 7,800 Georgian soldiers have deployed to Iraq since the beginning of OIF, serving alongside U.S. forces.

Over 50 served in Afghanistan during the Afghan elections in 2004. Four Georgian soldiers have paid the ultimate price and nineteen more have been wounded while serving in combat alongside U.S. and Coalition forces in Iraq. Georgia is among our staunchest Allies in the War on Terror.

While our defense and military relations with Georgia grew, we maintained an active military-to-military relationship with Russia.

To ensure transparency, we provided regular briefings on GTEP and GSSOP activities to the Russians and periodically informed senior Russian military officers about the scope and nature of our capacity building activities. Unfortunately, it appears that the Russians have been unable to move beyond their Cold War-era "zero sum" thinking, as the actions of Russian military units to systematically eviscerate the Georgian armed forces appear, in part, to be "revenge" for these capacity-building programs.

CONSULTATIONS PRIOR TO AND DURING THE CONFLICT

The Department of Defense was deeply involved both prior to and during the onset of conflict in an effort to convince leaders on both sides to de-escalate and refrain from resolving their differences by military force. The Secretary of Defense spoke with President Saakashvili on numerous occasions, including in November of 2007, and again in March of 2008 during bilateral consultations in Washington.

The Secretary of Defense continued to speak with his Georgian and Russian counterparts during the crisis, urging restraint and stressing that all forces must move back to pre-August 6 positions.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff also spoke with his Georgian and Russian counterparts during the crisis. The latter explained to him that Russia had limited aims and would not seek to expand hostilities into areas controlled by the Government of Georgia. Russia's actions clearly contradicted these commitments.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Fata made trips to Georgia on April 17, when tensions were extremely high following the Bucharest Summit and Russian moves in Abkhazia, and again on June 30. During these trips, as part of the wide array of U.S.-Georgia bilateral defense discussions, we urged Georgia to show "restraint" and not be provoked by Russia.

The consistent message was one of strategic patience and to find a peaceful resolution to the frozen conflicts, as Russia was clearly adding to tension in order to provoke a Georgian response.

As the conflict sparked, the Secretary of Defense spoke with his Russian and Georgian counterparts on Friday, August 8 and with President Saakashvili on August 9. The Secretary stressed that there were no military solutions to the conflict, as Georgia was likely to face an overwhelming Russian military action in response to any Georgian attempts to respond militarily in the separatist regions.

Despite the movements, tension, and rhetoric, which we had seen regularly in previous years, we had little warning of an impending large-scale conflict until August 7. On the 7th, we had indications of Georgia's general mobilization, as Georgian troops being trained for their future deployment to Iraq did not show up for training. The speed with which the fighting ensued and the ferocity of the conflict escalated rapidly.

There were no Department of Defense service members involved in the conflict. The United States had 80 service members training Georgian forces in country for future deployment to Iraq, as well as four service members who had participated in the July 15-31, in the Spirit of Partnership for Peace Immediate Response 08 exercise involving U.S., Georgian and other regional partner nations.

It should also be noted that, at the request of the Georgian government, on August 10-11, the United States airlifted approximately 1,800 Georgian troops from Iraq back to Georgia, per a long-standing agreement with Georgia to provide transport for Georgian forces deployed to Iraq.

RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA

The fact that this is the first large-scale use of Russian military forces outside its borders since the fall of the Soviet Union sends a chilling message. Russia's invasion of Georgia highlights a new aggressiveness in Russian foreign policy and a willingness to use military force to achieve its goals in the near abroad.

By recognizing the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Dmitry Medvedev, Russia's president, made clear that Moscow's goal is to take advantage of the current conflict to create new facts on the ground. These actions contradict the message delivered by then-President Putin to President Bush at Sochi in April, which indicated that Russia sought to work with the international community in addressing 21st century global challenges.

In recent months, Russian officials have questioned the legality of Ukraine's sovereignty over the Crimea, openly stating the Black Sea Fleet will never leave the Ukrainian port of Sevastopol (in the Crimea), lease or not, and there are also press reports of Russia issuing passports to Ukrainian citizens in the Crimea—much like had been done in Georgia. This is a concern which we should follow closely in the months ahead.

Russia's actions in Georgia have put its relations with the rest of the world in jeopardy. The U.S., European states, G7 members and others have asked what type of relationship Russia wants with the international community.

There is agreement that Russian actions are leading it towards isolation, and it must reverse course- starting in Georgia.

Russia's actions have caused a reassessment, not just of U.S. policies toward Russia, but of the European Union's, of NATO's, and beyond. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, of which Russia is a member, refused to endorse Russia's unilateral recognition of South Ossetian and Abkhaz independence; in fact, it issued a statement reaffirming the principal of territorial integrity of states. The European Union, under French leadership, met in an extraordinary session to criticize Russia's disproportionate military response, condemn Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and postpone meetings on the EU – Russia Partnership Agreement. The G-8 is issuing "G-7" statements to let a fellow member know Russia's actions are not condoned by the larger group.

As the statement on Georgia at the NAC has shown, the Alliance is united in its support for Georgia's territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence.

Georgia has been a strong friend and partner of NATO.

The NATO Alliance of the post-Cold War period was an alliance of democratic and Euro-Atlantic states which shared values. The NATO Alliance of today is an Alliance that will defend the values that shaped its foundation and support aspirants from external threats.

Georgia's NATO ambitions rest on fundamental shared values and a promise that NATO would keep its doors open to all aspirants ready to shoulder the responsibilities of membership. Prior to the conflict, the Georgian people and government had shown their commitment, and the U.S. and many NATO Allies felt Georgia was ready to move to the next stage to MAP. The message we send in the coming weeks and months will be heard not only by Georgians but by all those in the region who look to the West as a source of security, inspiration and freedom. We should send the right message that Russian aggression will not impact the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Georgia and Ukraine.

NATO has decided to further NATO – Georgian relations by establishing a NATO – Georgia Commission. This body will help bring Georgia even closer to NATO membership.

Although Russia has shown an apparent lack of concern for its international image in recent days by saying it does not care about WTO and G-8 membership, it has isolated itself and will pay a diplomatic and economic price for its solitude.

Of particular note, since the start of the conflict, Russia is hemorrhaging international investment and its stock market has lost significant value. Russia may believe it has gained a tactical victory by defeating the Georgian army. Yet this victory has made it more isolated, less admired and deeply resented by its neighbors.

WHAT ARE WE DOING TODAY?

First, we must support Georgia. We seek to stabilize the situation on the ground; help the country recover and thrive economically; preserve Georgia's sovereignty; maintain our support for its territorial integrity, and assist in rebuilding its military.

Our primary concern after the outbreak of hostilities was to stop the shooting and to help the people of Georgia. Our humanitarian efforts by air, land and sea have mitigated the human suffering and exhibited U.S. steadfast support for the Georgian people in their time of need.

As we continue with our humanitarian relief, our primary effort now is to support Georgia, and its democratically elected government. Last week, the U.S. rolled out a $1 billion in additional economic assistance to Georgia which will help it weather the immediate needs caused by the current crisis. As we move ahead, we look forward to working with the Congress on assistance packages that best frame the U.S. commitment to Georgia and regional partners at this critical time. We also look forward to close collaboration with our multilateral development bank partners, the European Union, and other international donors.

The Department of Defense has been primarily focused on fulfilling the President's commitment to provide humanitarian assistance to the people of Georgia.

Through September 8, 62 sorties have delivered more than 1145 short tons of ~~of~~ humanitarian aid. USS MCFAUL, USCGC Dallas and USS MOUNT WHITNEY have delivered humanitarian supplies through the Georgian ports of Batumi and Poti.

Georgia, like any sovereign country, should have the ability to defend itself and to deter renewed aggression. The Supreme Allied Commander, General Craddock, visited Tbilisi on August 21, meeting with high-level Georgian officials and surveying the damage to Georgia's infrastructure and military. The Department of Defense is sending an assessment team to Tbilisi later this week to help us begin to consider carefully Georgia's legitimate needs and our response. After assessments of these needs, we will review how the United States will be able to support the reconstruction of Georgia's economy, infrastructure, and armed forces. These steps will be sequenced and will continue to show U.S. support for Georgia's security, independence, and territorial integrity.

For several years, the United States has played a significant role in preparing Georgian forces to conduct counterterrorism missions, first as part of an effort to help Georgia rid its Pankisi Gorge of Chechen and other extremists and then as part of multinational coalition efforts. It is worth noting that on the night of August 7, Georgia's best-trained military forces - which represented 20 per cent of its active duty forces - were on duty in Iraq in support of the multinational coalition effort there.

Georgia, in fact, fielded the third largest national contingent to the Coalition in Iraq, behind only the United States and United Kingdom. We recognize, of course, that because of the events of the past month, Georgia's own national security concerns may now mean it may be less able to contribute to such coalition efforts in the future. We will be looking carefully and responsibly at Georgia's needs over the coming weeks and months.

U.S. efforts to help Georgia will not be undertaken by us alone. NATO's North Atlantic Council decided on August 19 to develop a NATO-Georgia Commission aimed at supporting Georgia's relations with NATO. NATO has also decided to assist Georgia in assessing the damage caused by Russian military action, including to the Georgian Armed Forces, and to help restore critical services necessary for normal public life and economic activity. NATO has already sent an Advisory Support team to Georgia as well as its Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia, and the North Atlantic Council Permanent Representatives plan to visit Georgia in the near future. Finland's Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb, the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, has logged many miles and worked tireless hours to help resolve the conflict. Stubb's performance has been extraordinary ~~has been a star~~; he has single-handedly assured that OSCE's crisis response mechanisms are fully engaged and operational.

The U.S. is also committed to demonstrate support for other friends and partners in the region especially for those such as Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic nations, who have been threatened by Moscow. These countries must know the United States is with them, and just as importantly, Russia must know the same.

As we work to support Georgia and our Allies, we must also review our relations with Russia. We will not continue with business as usual. We have suspended our bilateral military interaction with Russia and are in the process of a comprehensive review of all activities.

CONCLUSION

Although Russia has ceased its offensive military operations, Russian forces continue to occupy parts of Georgia. Russia has not lived up to its stated obligations in the cease-fire agreement signed by Russian President Medvedev.

We call on Russia to carry through with its stated promise to withdraw forces from areas outside the separatist territories, as was agreed upon in prior agreements and the September 8 agreement in Moscow with French President Sarkozy. Russia's recognition of Abkhaz and South Ossetian independence, taken immediately after cessation of hostilities and as the conflicts' embers were still smoldering, suggests that Russian political and military aims toward Georgia were not limited to restoring the pre-war political-military status quo.

The United States, over the course of three Administrations, has sought to secure and sustain the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the new independent states of Eurasia.

Concurrently, we worked to assist Russia in its integration into the global economic community as well as to facilitate Russian cooperation with NATO in the new, post-Cold War Europe. Our regional policies were not zero-sum in nature, nor did they prioritize one country over the other. We firmly believed, and still believe, that democratic nations along Russia's borders are in Russia's best interest.

Our policies contributed to a Europe, more united and integrated through either membership or close association with the European Union and NATO.

Europe is freer, more prosperous and more secure than at anytime in its storied history. The policy of the United States in this region is unambiguous: we want to help the nations of this region travel along the same path toward freedom, democracy and market-based economies that so many of their neighbors in Europe have traveled.

We must not, and will not, allow Russia's aggression to succeed in Georgia. Nor must we miss an opportunity to link arms in solidarity with our partners and friends in the region in the face of aggression. The U.S. has a responsibility to support Georgia and we will be doing just that in the weeks and months ahead. And we must show Russia, through our words, our policies, and our actions, that is serves Russia's best interest, as well as those of the West, for Russia to take steps to end its isolation and work towards a constructive framework of relations with the U.S. and Europe.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to your questions and hearing your concerns.