

Georgia Grants US Military Privileges

Author: [Irakly Aladashvili](#)

Tbilisi is dramatically shoring up its military alliance with the United States

A new American-Georgian defence cooperation accord that came into force last week gives US servicemen unprecedented rights on Georgian territory.

Following weeks of heated debate, the Georgian parliament ratified the rather ordinarily named defence cooperation treaty on March 21 by 138 votes to one.

It gives American servicemen and their dependents the right to enter Georgia without either visa or passport. Some kind of identification document is enough. They can also carry firearms and enjoy the same privileges and immunity as diplomats.

American aircraft and vehicles are allowed to enter Georgian territory and airspace without charge and without inspection. The same conditions apply to any equipment or supplies that the US military brings in or out of Georgia.

Praising the new accord, Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze declared that Georgia is now a strong ally of America, and he hoped this partnership would solve many of his country's economic and political problems, including the restoration of lost territory.

Washington has allocated up to 18 million US dollars to Georgia in recent years to help upgrade its border controls. The Train and Equip programme launched by Washington in the country last summer, which brought American special forces to the Caucasus for the first time, has already brought in 64 million dollars worth of military aid.

However, the new military treaty has divided both the Georgian public and parliament and its ratification has been much delayed. Shevardnadze -- who has had a special relationship with many Washington politicians ever since he was the Soviet foreign minister under Mikhail Gorbachev -- lobbied passionately for the document to be adopted and at one point called opponents of ratification "enemies of Georgia".

Deputies opposed to the treaty called some of its provisions discriminatory, arguing that it was unfair for the American military to be permitted to carry firearms, when Georgian servicemen are not allowed to bear weapons off duty. "The government has trampled on our national interests and self-esteem," complained deputy Gamlet Chipashvili. Fellow deputy Levan Pirveli said, "This is not a treaty, but an act of surrender."

The controversial treaty was first signed on December 10 last year, at the beginning of the crisis over Iraq. However, deputies opposed to the document said that pressure increased noticeably in March as Washington stepped up the drive to war and the Georgian government expressed its loyal support.

The day after the treaty was ratified, the deputy chief of the General Staff Giorgy Giorgobiani visited Washington, taking with him technical specifications for nine Georgian airfields the Americans may want to use in the Iraqi campaign.

Washington has thanked Georgia for its support and put it on the State Department list of "coalition"

nations supporting the military campaign in Iraq. Should the war continue, it is possible that the US will take up Georgia's offer of military airfields. Tbilisi is only 940 km away from Baghdad, and 450 km from the Iraqi border.

The governor of Georgia's western region of Imereti, Temur Shashiashvili, has confirmed that US military specialists have visited the local Kopitnari airfield twice in the past few days.

At the same time, a US U-2 high-altitude spy plane has been patrolling the Russian-Georgian border - a move which has riled Moscow. Nikolai Deriabin, press spokesman for the Russian defence ministry, said two of its fighter interceptors had been sent to avert a possible incursion into the country's airspace.

The Georgian leadership is clearly hoping that it will win reciprocal gestures of support from Washington. Speaking in his weekly radio interview, Shevardnadze recently expressed the hope that once America was through with Iraq, it would step up its effort to settle the smouldering conflict in Abkhazia.

The leadership of the breakaway republic reacted swiftly. Daur Arshba, Abkhazia's deputy foreign minister called the Georgian president's statement "a brazen call for violence".

The new treaty is also unpopular with Sakaeronavigatsia, Tbilisi's air navigation service. By granting US aircraft free overflight of Georgian territory, the government is depriving the company of an important stream of income. Sakaeronavigatsia is already suffering loss of revenue from the previous US-led campaign in the region.

"The state owes Sakaeronavigatsia about 2.3 million dollars already," deputy finance minister Vasil Gigolashvili, told IWPR. "The amount has accrued as a result of granting Afghanistan-bound allied military and cargo aircraft the right of free overflight in late 2001."

Even some pro-western politicians, like former speaker of parliament Zurab Zhvania, although broadly welcoming the treaty, are critical of some parts of it. "The foreign ministry has not done enough work on this treaty; there are too many controversial provisions," Zhvania said "However, it appears that Georgia had no other choice but to ratify the document in its national interests."

Nino Burjanadze, the current speaker, put it a different way. "Georgia is indebted to America for its valuable help in recent years, and we had to prove it," she said after the vote. "By ratifying the defence treaty, we have paid our debt of gratitude as it clearly puts US interests before Georgia's own."

Irakly Batiashvili, chairman of the parliamentary committee for defence and security, said he hoped the accord would lead to the departure of Russian forces deployed on Georgian territory. " Now that (the treaty) has been ratified, the US military will be here to help us get rid of Russian troops, which would never leave otherwise," said

Irakly Aladashvili is a military analyst with Kviris Palitra newspaper in Tbilisi

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