

Paying the Blood Price: Reflections from Georgian Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan

Full Report
Current as of July 2023

Maia A. Earl
William & Mary '22

Daniel Maliniak
William & Mary
Associate Professor
Government Department

Introduction

It would likely come as a surprise to most Americans to learn that Georgia, a small country in the Caucasus Mountains with a population of about four million, sent its armed forces abroad to serve alongside U.S. and NATO troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Not only did Georgian forces participate in these international missions, but they did so without national caveats,¹ risking (and sacrificing) their lives in the most dangerous and austere region of Afghanistan, Helmand Province. Georgia was the largest non-NATO contributor of troops in Afghanistan and maintained its presence in-country from 2010 until the U.S. withdrawal in August 2021². All of this was done without an explicit obligation, as Georgia is not a NATO member responding to Article 5 or a country with alliance commitments to the U.S. or other Western nations.

Given the associated risks and costs, what were Georgia's motivations for investing so heavily in these missions? What was to be gained for Georgia? As our research affirms, the reasons lie in Georgia's long-standing interest in NATO membership and in establishing strong ties with Western nations that would help ensure its national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Georgia showed interest in

¹ Some NATO countries agreed to deploy military units to Afghanistan with certain conditions (caveats); for example, that their troops would not participate in combat operations, night-time operations, or that they would not leave the base.

² "Joint Statement of the U.S.-Georgia Security Working Group," U.S. Department of State, accessed July 16, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-of-the-u-s-georgia-security-working-group>. See also "Georgia: now the top non-NATO troop contributor in Afghanistan," NATO, June 26, 2013, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_101633.htm.

cooperating with Western partners during the 1990s under President Eduard Shevardnadze,³ but efforts did not gain significant traction until direct cooperation with the U.S. military began in the early 2000s.

Georgia's security cooperation with the U.S. coincided with and reflected the nation's larger aspirations to integrate with the West. In 2002, Georgia declared its goal of gaining accession to NATO. In the same year, when the U.S. launched the Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP), Georgia took a big step in developing a modern, professional military—one that was modeled largely after U.S. military doctrine⁴. The Georgian Defense Forces (GDF) cooperated with the U.S. military first in securing the Pankisi Gorge,⁵ and then in Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2004 to 2008, while military training and education programs in Georgia continued to develop and expand.

Then, in 2008, several months after Georgia and Ukraine were denied a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) but promised future membership at the NATO Summit in Bucharest, a five-day war between Russia and Georgia ensued, resulting in Russia's military occupation of Georgia's breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Despite this blow to Georgia's territorial integrity and the moral blow of the Bucharest summit, the Georgian Ministry of Defense continued to pursue cooperation with Western partners. The GDF first deployed to Afghanistan in 2010 and continued to do so until 2021 in support of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Resolute Support Mission (RSM), participating in the full spectrum of operations, from counter-insurgency patrols to building schools for Afghan children.

Discussions of these larger national and international issues do not address the personal motivations and experiences of those most directly affected by Georgia's involvement. Given the associated risks and costs, what were Georgian soldiers' motivations for investing so heavily in these missions? What was to be gained for Georgian soldiers? Our research helps shed light on these questions.

The importance of this research at this moment is underpinned by four factors. First, we are nearly two years out from the U.S. and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, an important focal point for U.S.-Georgian military cooperation over the past decade. Second, with 20 to 25 percent of Georgia's sovereign territory occupied by Russia and Russian-backed separatists, Georgians have been watching the Russian invasion of Ukraine closely and thinking about their own defense capabilities.⁶ Third, in

³ Georgia joined NATO's Partnership for Peace program in 1994. Select Georgian military officers began training in the U.S. through the International Military Education and Training program. Despite these developments, Georgia's weak state institutions, internal conflicts in the breakaway regions, and failure to democratize following the fall of the Soviet Union precluded the development of a strategic partnership with the U.S. For a contemporary U.S. assessment of Georgia's status, see Gallis (1995).

⁴ Moroney, Jennifer D. P., et. al, "APPENDIX A: Illustrative Train and Equip Programs," in *Building Partner Capabilities for Coalition Operations*, 1st ed., 67–80, (RAND Corporation: 2007), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg635a.14>.

⁵ The Pankisi Gorge is a region on Georgia's northern border with Russia that, in the early 2000s, was believed to be a safe haven for terrorist organizations including Al Qaeda. Through GTEP, the U.S. trained a Georgian special operations unit to assist in anti-terrorism operations in the Pankisi Gorge.

⁶ Some Georgian veterans have been fighting in Ukraine against the Russian invasion as members of one of the more well-known groups of foreign fighters, the Georgian Legion, and in the International Legion of Territorial Defense of

light of the geopolitical situation and the agreement on a five-year bilateral security cooperation initiative, the Georgia Defense and Deterrence Enhancement Initiative, it is an ideal time to look back at how soldiers view and understand their experiences with previous U.S. cooperation. Finally, like the U.S., Georgia is facing issues meeting military recruitment and retention goals. Understanding the views of veterans may shed light on the challenges the Georgian Defense Forces face in sustaining a ready, efficient, and capable force to defend Georgia against external threats into the future.

Research Questions

Through our field research, we sought to understand Georgia's reasons for participating in the Iraq and Afghanistan missions through the eyes of Georgian veterans with firsthand experience in these conflicts.⁷ We wanted to understand both what motivated Georgian soldiers, personally, to volunteer to deploy and what these veterans believed were Georgia's broader interests in participating. We also inquired about their experiences working with U.S. and NATO troops (whether on deployments or in training), the institutional impacts of this cooperation, and their thoughts on Georgia's accession to NATO and relations with the West.

Methodology

Our field research team, headed by Associate Professor of Government Daniel Maliniak, consisted of five William & Mary undergraduates and one graduate student with various academic and professional backgrounds.

Our team conducted most of the interviews in-country between May and August, 2022, and several additional and follow-up interviews in September 2022 and February 2023. We conducted face-to-face interviews whenever possible because it facilitated the establishment of rapport between researcher and subject and encouraged relaxed and candid conversations. We kept our interviews semi-structured to allow for the subject to lead the conversation in unanticipated directions. This allowed us to collect a wide range of information that we might later find useful and to modify or expand our questions accordingly in subsequent interviews. In cases where the subject was not available for a face-to-face meeting, researchers used virtual means, such as Zoom or phone calls, to conduct the interview.

Sampling Method

The team set about finding interview subjects primarily by asking pre-established contacts for references. These subjects often referred us to additional interview candidates, and we acquired the

Ukraine. Some of these veterans have experience fighting alongside coalition troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and received U.S. training.

⁷ The team was led by Associate Professor Daniel Maliniak and included Maia Earl '22, Daniella Marx '24, Abby Stern '24, Chuck Williamson '21, M.B.A. '23, Katrine Westgaard '23, Aliia Woodworth '23.

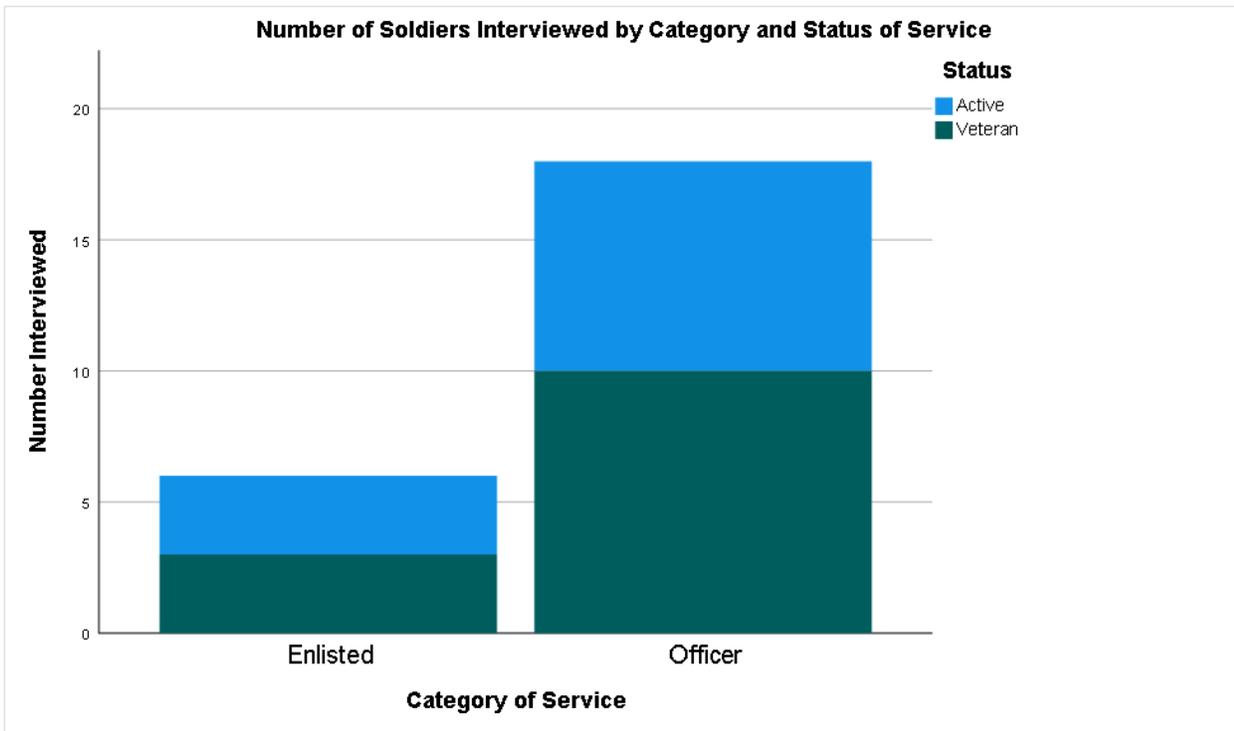
majority of our new leads in this way. We also found contacts by reaching out to organizations directly, with whom no prior contact had been established.

Sample Characteristics

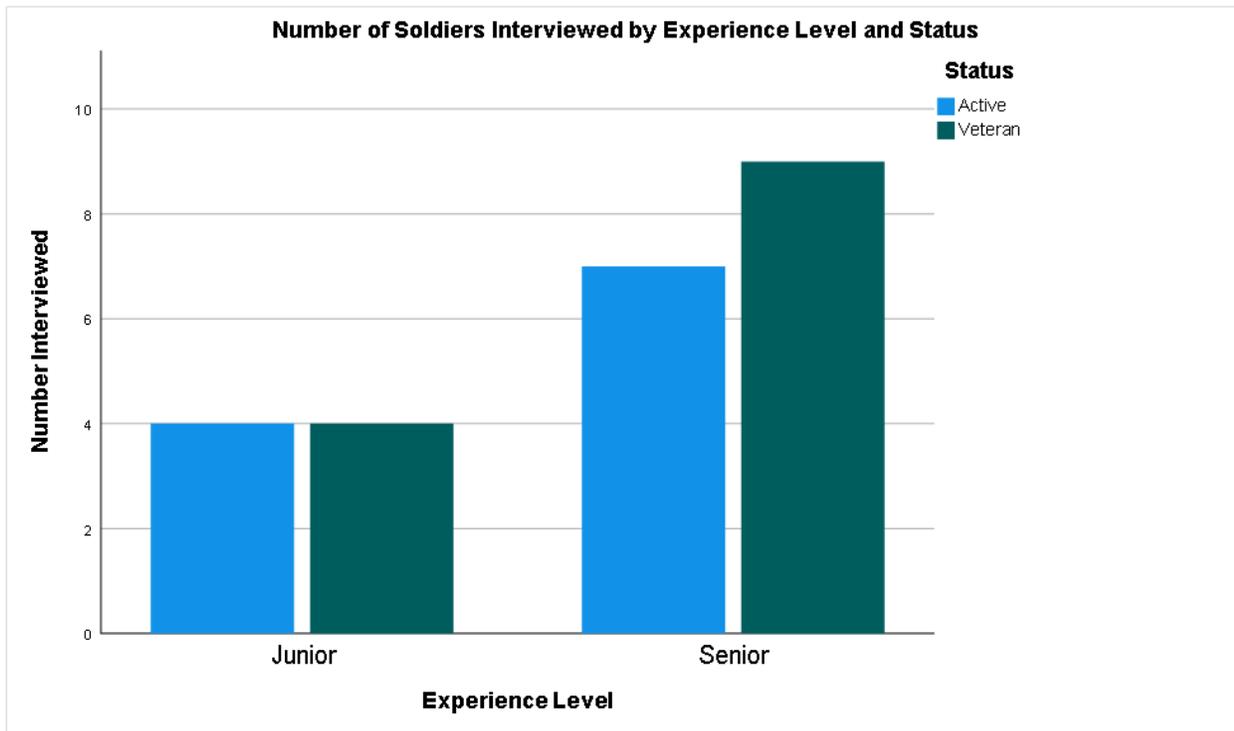
The primary objective was to speak with individuals who had served in the Georgian military in some capacity and had deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan in support of U.S. or NATO operations. We chose these criteria because such individuals' insights would provide qualitative information regarding how Georgians felt about their (and their country's) participation in international missions and their reasons for doing so. Their experiences working with U.S. and NATO service members would also provide insight as to how Georgian Defense Forces, individually and as an institution, might have benefited or changed as a result of this international cooperation.

While we began with the intention of interviewing military veterans—those who served and have since retired or separated from the military—our research led us to interview active-duty soldiers as well as veterans. Our subjects ultimately consisted of 11 active-duty soldiers and 12 veterans⁸. Five came from the enlisted ranks (privates, corporals, non-commissioned officers / sergeants), and 18 were or had been commissioned officers. Of the officers we spoke with, 14 had achieved the rank of Lieutenant Colonel (O-5) or higher and four came from lower ranks (Lieutenants and Captains). Of the enlisted and prior-enlisted members we spoke with, two were senior non-commissioned officers and the other four ranked E-5 or below.

⁸ The term "soldier" will be defined generally in this report as any member of the military (in this case, the Georgian Defense Forces), past or present, to include commissioned officers and enlisted personnel of any rank.



The above graph shows a breakdown of the sample of soldiers we interviewed by their category of service (officer or enlisted) and their current status as of the date of the interview (active-duty or veteran). The term “enlisted” includes both lower ranks (privates and corporals) and non-commissioned officers (sergeants).



Broken down differently, the above graph shows the soldiers we interviewed by their relative experience level (junior or senior) and their current status as of the date of the interview (active-duty or veteran). For our purposes, “senior” includes officers ranked O-4 (Major) and above and enlisted personnel ranked E-7 (equivalent to U.S. Army Master Sergeant) and above; “junior” includes officers ranked O-3 (Captain) and below and enlisted personnel ranked E-6 (Sergeant; equivalent to U.S. Sergeant First Class) and below. Senior officers and sergeants occupy staff (administrative) positions while juniors include the soldiers that make up platoons and companies, as well as the officers and sergeants directly overseeing them. In war-time, junior soldiers are more likely to participate directly in combat.

Our sample also included several soldiers who did not deploy to Iraq or Afghanistan. While we were most interested in speaking with veterans who had experience with these missions, we also found it informative to hear from those who had not deployed because they nevertheless provided insight into why their peers deployed or why they themselves had wished or not wished to deploy.

Interview Procedure

Face-to-face interviews were often held in public spaces such as cafes and parks, and sometimes offices; on rare occasions the interview took place at a private residence. Most interviews took place within the city of Tbilisi; several interviews were held in or near the city of Gori. When possible, two researchers conducted the interview together so as to increase the amount of information retained in notes. In this case, researchers took turns asking questions as they saw fit. Most subjects were

interviewed alone, but in several instances, multiple respondents participated in one session and answered questions in turn.

Researchers read a statement to each interviewee (pre-approved by the Institutional Review Board) which clarified the nature of the research, assured them of the confidentiality of the information collected, and confirmed that their participation in the research was voluntary. The interviewer obtained a verbal agreement from the subject before proceeding to the first question. Researchers ensured that contact information for the research team was provided to all subjects in the event that any questions or concerns should arise following the interview.

The questions asked were based on the primary research questions outlined above, but were often tailored to the subject's unique background and experience. Interviewers used their discretion in formulating follow-up questions during the interview based on the answers provided and the flow of conversation. The primary research questions served as a foundation and a basic framework, and additional lines of questioning often branched from these.

Results

Introduction

Below are general observations that reflect qualitative analysis of the 24 interviews conducted as well as noteworthy observations of individual or unique attitudes. Interviewees' non-verbal communication, such as tone of voice and body language, were taken into consideration. Such observations are also included in the response sections in cases where the research team deemed them relevant to the interpretation of a particular response.

The interviewee responses that follow are divided into four main sections: reasons for Georgia's and the GDF's participation in international missions; experiences with the U.S. and NATO-member militaries; impacts of this cooperation on the GDF specifically, and on Georgia more broadly; and thoughts on Georgia's accession to NATO and relations with the West.

Note: Distinctions between active-duty and veteran responses are only made where deemed relevant to the interpretation of the data. Otherwise, respondents are identified as "officers," "enlisted" or (generally) as "soldiers" throughout the results section, regardless of their status as active-duty or veteran.

General Observations

Willingness to Participate in the Research. Once initial contact was made, nearly all participants, both active-duty soldiers and veterans alike, were willing and often eager to participate in the research. Some expressed hope that their participation might ultimately help Georgia in some way.

English Language Preference. Most of our interviewees spoke English to varying degrees of fluency, and a few required an interpreter to communicate with our team. Participants expressed a desire to speak English wherever possible, even in cases where Russian-speaking members of our team offered to communicate in Russian instead (a language in which most participants were proficient). In a group interview with four officers, for example, the officers chose to “suffer” through the interview using their broken English—and interpreting for their colleague from Georgian into English—rather than to speak Russian.

Pride in Georgia’s Performance. When discussing Georgia’s participation in international missions, a common sentiment shared among nearly all respondents was a sense of pride in Georgia’s military performance. Regarding the Afghanistan missions, in particular, the majority of our subjects mentioned one of the following facts: 1) Georgia was the largest non-NATO contributor; 2) Georgia was the largest per-capita contributor; 3) Georgia was the 3rd-largest overall contributor; 4) Georgia participated in full-spectrum operations without caveats. They often expressed that Georgian soldiers’ demonstration of bravery earned the respect of the U.S. and other nations’ soldiers in Afghanistan, noting that military and political leaders of NATO countries also recognized Georgia’s reliability and acts of bravery. This sense of pride was shared by senior and junior soldiers alike.

Respondents also expressed pride in Georgia’s performance by highlighting Georgians’ cultural awareness as compared with that of Americans. Two respondents mentioned cultural awareness as a unique skill that Georgians brought to the NATO missions in Afghanistan.

Responses

Reasons for participation

Overview. For the purposes of our research, the question of why Georgia participated in the international missions of Iraq and Afghanistan was twofold: 1) we wanted to understand what motivated Georgian soldiers, personally, to volunteer to deploy in support of these missions; and 2) we wanted to hear from these soldiers and veterans what they believed were Georgia’s reasons for participating in these missions.

The responses to this two-fold question often overlapped; some of the soldiers’ personal motivations aligned with the nation’s primary motivation – a desire for Georgia to become a member of NATO. The most common responses to this question fell into one of the three following categories: 1) to receive increased salaries to support their families (“salary”); 2) to gain real-world or battlefield experience (“experience”); and 3) to increase Georgia’s international presence; to demonstrate commitment to the U.S. or NATO, or to further integrate with NATO (“international relations”). Responses which differed slightly from these descriptions but which generally supported similar concepts have been categorized

accordingly and elaborated. Georgia's participation in Kosovo in 1999 was also mentioned on a few occasions, although interviewers did not inquire about Kosovo specifically.

Salary. Those who were asked directly about their personal reasons for deploying to Iraq or Afghanistan reported the increased salary they would receive for deploying had been a significant motivator. Increased salary was the first response given (and listed as the number one reason) by all of the enlisted soldiers who were asked this question, and for most of them, this incentive was directly linked to their need to support their families. One of these soldiers stated matter-of-factly that "everyone wants to go there [to Afghanistan] because there is more salary."⁹

It is worth noting that one prior-enlisted veteran who was not asked about his reasons for deploying stated that Georgia did not benefit from participating in Iraq. He stated that he had gained some experience there, but nothing more. This response does not indicate whether or not the increased salary was a motivation for him, but it seems to imply that whatever financial benefit he and his family may have gained was not significant enough to acknowledge when reflecting on his experience in Iraq.

Interviewers rarely asked senior officers about their personal reasons for deploying, but five were asked to comment generally on soldiers' motivations for deploying. Of these five officers, four listed salary as one of the incentives. Notably, the increase in pay was not the officers' first response, and one officer ranked the financial incentive as less of a motivation than the "security blanket" that Georgia could gain through closer cooperation with the U.S. military (See "International Relations" below).

For one junior officer who was unable to deploy but had wanted to, money was not mentioned as the primary personal motivation; rather, the respondent sought the experience it would have provided (see "Experience" below). However, the same respondent did mention the withdrawal from Afghanistan had affected retention rates because the training, *increased pay*, and experience that deployments had offered were no longer a possibility, indicating that pay had been a decisive factor for many soldiers.

Experience. In addition to increased salary, the real-world military experience that deployments offered to soldiers was frequently cited as a significant motivation for individuals.

One senior officer ranked experience as the number one reason that Georgian soldiers went to Afghanistan, characterizing Georgian soldiers as professionals looking to increase their expertise. He likened their desire for deployment experience to surgeons' desire to perform difficult surgeries. Another respondent ranked experience as the second-most motivating factor for deployment (second to international relations), stating that Georgians are "thirsty to learn;" that deployment offered a means of learning one's responsibilities and one's job; and that soldiers would take lessons away from the

⁹ This statement was translated from Georgian to English by an interpreter in the room.

battlefield. Another respondent likewise ranked experience number two (second to money), stating that soldiers “grew up” in Afghanistan (see “experiences”).

As mentioned above, one junior officer stressed the importance of deployment as a means of gaining experience. The respondent described deployment experience as invaluable, stating that it is the primary experience that training cannot provide for soldiers. The respondent noted that international training programs are likewise extremely important (see “Experiences with U.S. and NATO militaries.”)

Three other respondents discussed deployment experience and training as a motivation for Georgia, at large, to send its troops to Iraq and Afghanistan. One of these respondents stated specifically that Georgia sent its troops to Afghanistan “to train them.” Soldiers went through seven months of pre-deployment training—six of which were completed in Germany—prior to deploying to Afghanistan. This extensive training combined with the experience they would gain abroad working with NATO troops was considered important for the GDF’s development.

International Relations. Most respondents also listed reasons related to the development and cultivation of Georgia’s international relations. The way this idea was characterized differed slightly from one respondent to the next; some responses focused on Georgian national pride, others on cultivating relations with NATO countries or integrating with NATO, and others focused on national security for Georgia (i.e., what eventual NATO membership or bilateral alliances would mean for Georgia).

National Pride. Several senior soldiers stated that serving in international missions was a matter of national pride. Georgian soldiers were proud to represent Georgia on the international stage. One officer stated that serving in Afghanistan was prestigious for the soldiers, and that public relations surrounding their participation there were very high.

Demonstration of Commitment; National Security. Other senior soldiers referenced international relations in the context of ensuring Georgian national security. By serving in these missions, Georgians were showing to the U.S. and NATO that Georgia was a reliable partner and that Georgia was “not only a consumer of security, but (...) a contributor.” One respondent simply stated that Georgia went to Iraq and Afghanistan “to protect ourselves.”

One junior soldier likewise discussed the cultivation of international relations as the primary reason that Georgia, at large, participated in Iraq and Afghanistan. Regarding Georgia’s participation in ISAF, the respondent stated that “The whole point [was] to demonstrate to the U.S. that we are a good ally. We wanted to be like Israel.” He explained that Georgians wanted to have American bases in Georgia, and to “have that kind of untouchable presence” in the region, much like Israel has in the Middle East, due to the unwavering support it receives from the U.S. He went on to say that Georgia’s contribution in Afghanistan was a way of “paying the blood price” in exchange for protection from the U.S.

Another senior officer recalled that in Iraq, where the GDF's primary role was to conduct security operations, Georgian soldiers were eager to play a more offensive role to better demonstrate their commitment to the U.S. They would later have that opportunity in Afghanistan, he said, where Georgians were involved in full-scale counter-insurgency operations (see "Impacts" for further comments on this). When asked why Georgian soldiers were in Afghanistan, the officer stated that their participation there gave them (i.e., Georgia) a "security blanket" through building trust and confidence. While he acknowledged "a little bit of financial motivation," he asserted that "everyone understands that the U.S. was obliged to help" – i.e., obliged to help Georgia in the case of a future conflict.

Integration with the West. One senior officer stated that even though Iraq and Afghanistan were not their (i.e. Georgians') country, Georgians were serving in these missions to become a part of Europe and NATO. (Note: the respondent spoke in the first-person plural, "we," indicating that he was personally motivated by these reasons. The officer described Georgia's desire to integrate with the West as directly succeeding its gaining independence from the Soviet Union). Two junior soldiers stated that aside from the financial incentive that motivated them personally, Georgia wanted to integrate with NATO and to have closer relations with the West.

Experiences with U.S., NATO militaries

Overview. Most of our interviewees had experience working or training with U.S. or NATO-member militaries, whether in Georgia or abroad. 11 of the 14 senior officers we interviewed had spent significant time training or studying in the United States in programs such as the Maneuver Captain's Career Course, the U.S. Army War College, English language training at the Defense Language Institute, and others. Between 2001 and 2009, these education and training programs were funded by the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program and Foreign Military Funding (FMF). Most remembered their experience in the U.S. as having a positive impact on their professional development. Georgian soldiers' experiences with U.S. and NATO troops also included GTEP, which was often described as transformational for the GDF; subsequent U.S.-led training programs; pre-deployment training in Georgia and in Germany; international exercises hosted in Georgia; and deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq, each experience having unique impacts. In general, deployment experiences seemed to have the most far-reaching impacts on Georgian soldiers.

General Observations (Varied Attitudes). Individual attitudes toward Western militaries varied based on their experiences. In a group interview with four officers, the two who had received training in the U.S. generally expressed more enthusiasm than their colleagues for continued U.S.-Georgian military cooperation and for Georgia and the GDF to become more Western-oriented. The two officers who had not trained in the U.S., while clearly proud of Georgians' service and sacrifice in international missions, came off as more reserved in the interview and did not openly praise or convey admiration for U.S. or other NATO forces. These observations indicate a correlation—though not necessarily

causation—between Georgian soldiers’ completion of U.S.-based training and enthusiasm for the adoption of Western military doctrine or cultivation of relations with the West. See *Thoughts on NATO Membership and Relations with the West* and the conclusion for further discussion.

Georgia Train and Equip Program. One respondent who had received training through IMET believed that IMET and FMF were beneficial for Georgia, but that they were “not enough,” stating that the Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP) in the early 2000s was the real “game-changer” that resulted in the GDF’s developing Western-style battalions. He also noted that GTEP proved particularly beneficial to the U.S. because of the protective role that Georgians played in Iraq.

Two senior officers participating in a group interview articulated the transformational impact of GTEP on the GDF, recalling that it had “changed everything” for them, from their doctrine, to their guns, to their uniforms and boots, the way they marched, etc. According to one of these officers, the launching of GTEP marked the first time Georgians had seen the U.S. military in Georgia, and it showed them how a “modern military” works. Both officers recounted with excitement how their conditions vastly improved as a result of GTEP. Where they had been using Soviet tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs), and even old Soviet boots and uniforms, now the GDF had established its first fully trained commando battalion (the Sachkhere Mountain Battalion would likewise graduate GTEP shortly thereafter¹⁰) using modern equipment. They expressed that the completion of training and equipping the first battalion was an important moment for Georgia, as a nation, and they described a great show of public support at a ceremony held in Tbilisi’s Freedom Square.

Deployment Experience. One senior officer who had participated in GTEP felt that the training was beneficial, but stressed that his deployment to Iraq and seeing American units in action impacted him more profoundly and changed his leadership mindset. On his deployment as a battalion commander, he noticed that the American battalion commanders were relaxed and able to manage their tasks effectively, while he was overwhelmed by his responsibility to manage all of the tasks of his battalion. He began to see the value in the Americans’ use of Mission Command—the strategy of delegation of authority to both non-commissioned officers and junior officers—and felt inspired to implement a similar strategy within the GDF. Following his deployment, he decided to learn English, and he went on to advance his studies and complete additional training in the U.S. (See “Impacts” for further discussion on Mission Command).

Other respondents likewise emphasized the impacts of their deployments. One veteran with extensive experience in Afghanistan described the positive influence that American troops had on Georgian soldiers there. Soldiers under his supervision “grew up” in Afghanistan, not only through learning how

¹⁰ See Giorgi Sepashvili, “Second US-Trained Battalion on Guard,” *Civil Georgia*, October 5, 2003, <https://civil.ge/archives/103330>. The 16th Mountain Battalion at Sachkhere became a NATO-sponsored training school in 2010, named the Colonel Besik Kutateladze Sachkhere Mountain Training School. For a brief history, see <https://mountainschool.mod.gov.ge/page/history?lang=en>.

to properly carry a rifle and to be professional soldiers, but through shifting their mentality and their values. Soldiers gave up smoking and drinking and started “saying no to the other side” (i.e., to an inherited Soviet mentality and culture). By this account, Georgians seemed to view the American military and its tactics, doctrine, and culture as a role model that facilitated significant advancement in their military professionalism and a shift in their worldview.

One officer stated that, in addition to the transformative experience of GTEP, he had worked with U.S. Marines in peacekeeping operations, and that through these experiences he learned a lot about the unique culture of the Marines. He indicated that his and his fellow servicemen’s familiarity with U.S. military culture facilitated the ongoing cooperation between the GDF and the Georgia National Guard (that is, the U.S. state).¹¹

Another officer expressed deep admiration and respect for the U.S. military, recalling that especially in Afghanistan, the Georgians and the Americans developed a close relationship characterized by mutual trust. He described a feeling of confidence during these operations, knowing that the U.S. was providing strong air support and that “our friends were in front and overhead.” “We were one family,” he said. Similarly, another officer stated that in Afghanistan, there was an attitude between the Georgian and American troops that “we are brothers in arms absolutely” – that the U.S. Marines were sure that the Georgians were with them and the Georgians were sure that the Marines were with them.

One respondent who had deployed to Iraq did not have direct experience with U.S. troops while he was there; members of his unit were only stationed at checkpoints where U.S. troops were not located. (This appeared to be the case for several junior soldiers we interviewed). However, it later became clear to him that Western troops saw Georgian soldiers in the deployed environment as trustworthy. He noted that an American special forces general in Afghanistan specifically requested that his unit serve as their (the American unit’s) bodyguards. He stated that all Georgian units were invited to Kabul as a result of their reputation, and the Georgians (including him) were among the last troops to leave Kabul alongside U.S. and U.K. troops during the withdrawal from the country in August 2021.

In separate interviews, two other respondents related a similar story of Georgian troops being recognized for their bravery and dependability by their NATO counterparts, when Georgian soldiers rapidly responded to an attack on the German consulate in Afghanistan¹².

Another veteran who had served from 1993 to 2009 had unique experience working with American special forces in Iraq. He deployed to Baquba in 2004 and 2006 (assigned to an American A-10 unit), first with the Sachkhere Mountain Battalion and later as part of a special forces brigade, and he

¹¹ The respondent was initially describing U.S. Marine culture as being unique, but his comment on the Georgia National Guard implies he was referring to U.S. military culture, in general.

¹² This event occurred in 2016 and was reported by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs; see “Auswärtiges Amt zur Lage in Mazar-i-Sharif,” November 11, 2016, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/161111-mazar-i-sharif/285154>.

participated in operations that targeted Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) leaders including Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi. Note: this respondent's experience in the special forces represents a small percentage of Georgian soldiers' deployment experience, especially in Iraq, where most Georgians served in a security forces capacity.

Criticism. Despite being strong advocates of U.S. military doctrine, in separate interviews, two junior soldiers pointed out certain U.S. military behavior and/or policy they found disagreeable. (See "*Thoughts on NATO membership and Relations with the West*" for criticisms of Western political stances toward Georgia).

One junior soldier criticized U.S. military behavior in Afghanistan, noting that "Americans lack cultural subtlety." In Afghanistan, he said, U.S. troops did not take the time to learn about the Afghan culture, and so failed to show the Afghans an appropriate amount of respect. The respondent recalled that U.S. soldiers were told not to use inappropriate language when using an interpreter to speak with Afghans – something that was a common occurrence. Conversely, he was proud of Georgians' sensitivity to cultural differences, which he believed earned Georgians the respect not only of the Afghans they worked with, but of the Taliban as well.

One junior officer expressed frustration with the American evaluators of GDF battalion-level exercises. The officer noted that the American evaluators often came to a four-day battalion exercise for a short time—one hour, for example—and assessed that the training was going well. In the officer's opinion, the evaluators should spend at least one night to appreciate the reality of the situation, which was that soldiers, unlike their superior officers, were not benefiting or learning from such training.

Training in Germany. According to one junior officer, Georgian soldiers loved their pre-deployment training in Germany. The enlisted personnel under this officer's command had expressed their excitement for, and benefit from, this training which had included realistic simulations. According to the officer, the soldiers felt it was some of the best training they had received. The respondent then expressed discouragement with the situation in Georgia because they did not have a simulation center, and because training was at 10%, which was not enough. (Note: It is unclear what 10% referred to. It is possible that only 10% of soldiers were considered adequately trained for their jobs, or that the amount of training offered in Georgia was 10% of what it should be, or what it once was).

Two senior soldiers commented on other types of training they had personally received in Germany earlier in the 2000s; one who had received extensive officer training there was enthusiastic about the way it had shaped his leadership mindset, referring to Germany as the "birthplace of Mission Command" (08-01 eve). The other respondent did not like the German leadership courses that he went through, stating that Germany does not have a good NCO Corps, and that it looks more like the Russian NCO Corps.

Impacts of Military Cooperation on the GDF and Georgia (as articulated by participants)

Overview. In addition to the personal impacts of their deployments and experiences with U.S. and NATO-member militaries, respondents offered assessments of the broader impacts of these cooperation efforts—especially Georgia’s participation in Afghanistan—on the GDF and on their country. Impacts on the GDF included modernization and westernization, continued institutional reform, increased expertise and military professionalism, and job satisfaction among soldiers. More broadly, the GDF’s participation in international missions increased the nation’s international presence and recognition. Some respondents felt that it also prepared Georgia for the defense of its own territory in the case of a military invasion, while others expressed doubt about the transferability of the skills soldiers gained to that context.

Modernization, Westernization, and Continued Reform. In addition to the impact of deployment experiences, respondents also reflected on the role that their Western training and education played in the transformation of the GDF over the past two decades. In particular, the GDF established professional development schools modeled after those of the U.S. military, including the NCO Academy in 2004; the Captain Career Course in 2008; the Command and General Staff College (CGSC) in 2014; and the War College in 2022. According to one senior officer, the IMET program played a critical role in this development, as over one thousand personnel (70% officers and 30% NCOs) went through these programs in the U.S. and began implementing them in Georgia upon their return. Another senior officer stated that the knowledge he gained in the United States helped him to transform the GDF’s structure and institutions.

Perhaps the most salient institutional change that respondents noted was the adoption of Mission Command, a decentralized command strategy that contrasts with the Soviet doctrine of centralized command and control. Several senior officers stressed the importance of this command strategy for success as an organization, both on the battlefield and at home. They became passionate about implementing Mission Command as a result of both their experiences on deployments (i.e., seeing Western battalion commanders in action) and their Western training and education. The institutionalization of these changes remained a work in progress and was being incorporated into policy-making at the Ministry of Defense.

The development of a professional NCO corps seemed to be particularly critical for the GDF’s development and Westernization. The role of the NCO in Soviet doctrine, as one officer described, was to discipline and maintain control; the concept of empowering NCOs to take initiative and try things independently was new to the GDF and began to be developed through the new Georgian NCO schools, including team leader and squad leader schools. According to a retired senior NCO, the development of a professional NCO corps took time. The first senior sergeants’ course was created in 2010, and many NCOs during this time of transition were forced to step up into positions above their rank to establish the

chain of command necessary for the new framework. Nevertheless, he said that the GDF made great strides and successes, and that today, Georgian NCOs are more empowered than NCOs of other post-Soviet states' militaries. The aforementioned officer noted that all of these changes, along with engaging directly with the U.S. army, helped the GDF to become more interoperable with NATO.

Increased Expertise and Professionalism. Most respondents mentioned that the GDF's participation in Iraq and especially Afghanistan significantly increased its military expertise and professionalism. One senior officer stated that the impact was readily apparent; "If you compare those [soldiers] who deployed with those who haven't, there is a night and day difference," he said, due to their experience on the battlefield. (6-28) He estimated a total of about 90,000 Georgian troops went through pre-deployment training (Note: the respondent was likely referring to the Georgia Deployment Program, but may have also included other training programs. This may have also included soldiers who deployed multiple times). Another senior officer estimated that a total of about 20,000 soldiers participated in international missions, or about 80% of the GDF, but that this percentage was decreasing because many soldiers who had deployed were leaving the military at the time of the interview in July 2022.

Job satisfaction. Regarding the GDF's experience in Afghanistan, three respondents indicated that it had given soldiers job satisfaction because they had felt they were doing something meaningful, whether it be nation-building projects or counterterrorism operations. Since the withdrawal from Afghanistan, soldiers no longer experience such satisfaction, according to one senior officer. "Now, these soldiers barely get to the range. It is a big problem" he stated.

Defense Readiness. Interviewee responses varied with regard to the impact that the Afghanistan deployments had on Georgia's readiness and ability to defend itself against a military invasion. One senior officer stated that the Georgian army needs different skills than those they gained in Afghanistan. He stated that Georgians mostly conducted police operations in Afghanistan—i.e., patrols, checkpoints, working with Afghan partners, etc., but that to defend against Russia requires different skills. In contrast, another senior officer emphasized the importance of the combat and counter-insurgency experience that soldiers gained in Afghanistan, indicating that this experience improved the GDF's readiness and ability to defend their country. He added that the combat skills that Georgian soldiers acquired in Afghanistan have extended to Ukrainian forces via the Georgian veterans who have gone to fight in Ukraine. As mentioned above, the percentage of active GDF soldiers with deployment experience was declining as a result of those soldiers leaving the military. Several respondents likewise observed that since the withdrawal from Afghanistan, many soldiers with deployment experience had left the military and were continuing to leave on a steady basis, resulting in a declining state of readiness¹³.

¹³ Low retention rates represent a broader problem for the GDF; those leaving the military in recent years include both soldiers with and without deployment experience, but further data is required to accurately identify which categories of soldiers, if any in particular, are leaving the military. Several respondents indicated that the problem

International Recognition. One senior officer attributed the response of the international community to the 2008 invasion directly to Georgia's participation in Iraq. In his view, Georgian soldiers had earned such international recognition for their country that when Russia invaded, six heads of state from NATO-member countries flew to Tbilisi to show their support. As mentioned in the previous section, two respondents mentioned the praise and recognition the Georgians received following their defense of the German consulate in Afghanistan.

As another example of Georgia's international reputation, a junior soldier recalled that because the Taliban feared and respected Georgian soldiers, U.S. troops in Afghanistan began to paint the Georgian flag on their tanks to protect themselves from being attacked on patrols.

Exception. Most respondents, active duty and veterans alike, believed Georgia benefited greatly from participating in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, one junior-level veteran of Iraq stated that while the two months of training he received with the Americans was good training, he believed that Georgia did not benefit from participating in Iraq. The respondent felt that he had gained experience there, but nothing more. [The respondent reported suffering from post-traumatic stress as a result of his deployment(s), for which he had not received any medical assistance]. Nevertheless, the respondent favored Georgia's integration with the West more broadly.

Thoughts on NATO Membership and Relations with the West

Overview. Nearly all respondents expressed positive attitudes toward the West and a desire for continued defense cooperation between Georgia and the U.S. and NATO, and for continued efforts toward Euro-Atlantic integration, at large. However, respondents expressed mixed feelings about Georgia's prospective membership in NATO—not because membership was no longer desirable, but because it had become unrealistic to expect it. Some senior soldiers emphasized the need for the GDF to continue working closely with the U.S. military to progress toward their goals of Westernization and professional development. Responses regarding Georgia's readiness for NATO membership varied.

NATO and EU Integration. One senior officer stated that Georgian forces need as much direct interaction with the U.S. military as possible, regardless of whether Georgia receives a Membership Action Plan (MAP) or eventual accession to NATO. He considered NATO interoperability to be the most important objective for Georgia. Regarding the prospect of Georgia's joining the European Union (EU), he expressed less concern. He dismissed the news of Ukraine and Moldova being considered for candidacy by the EU¹⁴, stating that this was a temporary political move on the part of Europe because of

of retention centered more on junior officers (lieutenants and captains) and junior soldiers than on senior members.

¹⁴ The EU's awarding of candidacy to Moldova and Ukraine had recently occurred at the time of the interview. See Jessica Parker, et. al., "EU awards Ukraine and Moldova candidate status," BBC, June 23, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61891467>.

the war in Ukraine. He believed Georgia remained ahead of these countries in terms of meeting the criteria for EU candidacy, but that nevertheless, EU membership would not be the best thing for Georgia. Rather, he believed NATO membership (or integration) is what Georgia needed most. One junior officer expressed similar sentiments, stating that EU membership would not be in Georgia's best interest.

With regard to continued cooperation with U.S. forces, one senior officer expressed total commitment, stating "if the U.S. calls us, we will go" - e.g., to serve in another joint or coalition operation.

Mixed Feelings. One junior enlisted member expressed mixed feelings about the West and its stance toward Georgia. On one hand, he felt that participating in NATO missions was (and would continue to be) important for the GDF because it gave soldiers additional experience. On the other hand, he expressed pessimism regarding the willingness of the West to help Georgia militarily in the event of a Russian invasion. Recalling the 2008 war, he stated that Europe did not help Georgia enough for them (Georgia) to achieve victory¹⁵. In regards to Europe, he said, "They have only words." It is unclear whether these sentiments may have applied to the U.S. as well, or if they were limited to Europe. (6-25). One senior officer present for this interview commented that the U.S. was not doing enough for Georgia, and they needed to do more.

Hope for NATO Membership. With regards to their hopefulness about Georgia's eventual accession to NATO, most respondents seemed to have tempered their expectations as a result of many years having passed without an indication from NATO that Georgia is any closer to achieving that goal. 14 years after the 2008 summit which had indicated that Georgia and Ukraine would eventually become NATO members, Georgia still did not have a MAP, and the wait could be indefinite. Some expressed cynical attitudes, while most saw the benefit of pursuing interoperability with NATO, regardless of whether it resulted in NATO membership for Georgia.

One senior officer expressed discouragement with NATO, saying "all of Georgia wants [NATO membership], but I am losing hope. Sometimes I think they are lying." He described his lack of faith in the promise that Georgia would one day be admitted into NATO because it is "not today, not tomorrow... it never ends."

Another senior officer responded to the question of Georgia's accession to NATO first with a laugh. He explained that if we had asked him that question two years ago, he would have been advocating absolutely for NATO accession, believing that that was within reach. Now, he said, he has a more realistic view. He had tempered his hopes because he understood the broader dilemma of Great Power Competition and the threat of nuclear war. Nonetheless, he expressed a deep motivation to adopt Western military doctrine and the need for Georgia to align itself with the West in the face of the

¹⁵ The 2008 war did not reach a resolution, but rather, a ceasefire. 20-25% of Georgia's sovereign territory remains occupied by Russian forces.

Russian threat. He believed this policy of aligning with the West to be the only way for Georgia to survive and maintain national sovereignty.

Another senior officer believed it would be better for Georgia to be a member of NATO than to pursue a bilateral agreement with the U.S., but that the former will not happen. Even if the U.S. were to sign on to a bilateral agreement (i.e., to defend Georgia in case of invasion), he noted that there is a big problem of how the U.S. would be able to help because of the geography.

NATO Response Time. Similarly, three senior officers, while they acknowledged the value of pursuing NATO membership, observed that in the event of a Russian invasion, NATO would not be able to respond in time before the GDF would be overwhelmed.

Georgia's Readiness for NATO Membership. Responses varied with regards to Georgia's relative readiness to join NATO. Some believed there was work to be done internally while others believed that the reasons for Georgia's exclusion lay outside of Georgia, in the broader geostrategic dilemma. Several respondents expressed the importance of foreign relations with Western nations because small countries like Georgia need to have protection.

At least two respondents believed that Georgia's accession to NATO depends not on Georgia, but on NATO countries. As one of them put it: "we are ready; the question now is geopolitical." This respondent believed that the U.S. would pay less if they let Georgia and Ukraine into NATO, and that the 2022 invasion of Ukraine is evidence of that. He argued it would have been less expensive to let Ukraine into NATO and arm them during peacetime.

Another senior officer was generally pessimistic about NATO countries' awareness of, or appreciation for Georgia, stating that Georgia would have been a member of NATO already had it not been for Germany (and other countries) in 2008. He believed that militarily, Georgia was (at time of interview) ready and interoperable, and he credited the Cubic team¹⁶ with having helped to reform Georgia's defense sector rapidly. His impression, though, was that since the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan, "everyone forgot about our support like it never happened." Nevertheless, he noted that "we are stuck on [NATO accession]" and that this goal is written into Georgia's constitution. "Let's see. We have to be patient," he said.

In contrast, at least three senior officers felt that Georgia needed to do more work to be aligned with Western and NATO principles and doctrine. As mentioned in [the previous] section, the adoption of Mission Command was still a work in progress, and a Soviet leadership style was persisting in the GDF despite efforts to change, which some viewed as a significant shortcoming.

¹⁶ Cubic contractors have filled training and evaluation roles for the U.S. DoD in Georgia.

Limitations

The scope of our field research was limited by several factors, including the position and relative seniority of the soldiers interviewed; the amount of direct experience they had working with U.S. or other NATO countries' troops; and our team's identity as American researchers. While our sample of interviewees was nearly equally divided among active and veteran soldiers, our data largely reflects the views and perceptions of senior-level commissioned officers—one subset of the GDF. Because commissioned officers and enlisted soldiers (including non-commissioned officers) receive different types of training and fill different roles within the GDF and on deployments, our research would benefit from a more balanced sample that includes a larger number of enlisted and prior-enlisted soldiers. Similarly, 11 of the 14 senior officers we interviewed had spent significant time training or studying in the United States in programs such as the Maneuver Captain's Career Course, the U.S. Army War College, English language training at the Defense Language Institute, and others. These programs (as they are intended to do) expose participants not only to U.S. military doctrine but to broader democratic ideals and ways of life. Those who have received such training represent a relatively small portion of the GDF¹⁷ and their views could differ from those of officers and soldiers who have not received such training. Lastly, our team's identity as American researchers could have influenced the responses of our participants; for example, criticisms of U.S. policy or of the effectiveness of U.S. training could have been withheld. However, our team did not make specific observations that led us to believe this was the case.

Discussion

Our research with Georgian military and veterans explored four main topics: their reasons for participating in international missions; their experiences with U.S. and NATO-member militaries; the impacts—personal, institutional, and national—of such international cooperation; and their thoughts on NATO membership and relations with the West. Our interviews found that their reasons for participating in international missions included increased salary, gaining real-world experience, and increasing Georgia's international presence—and thereby its national security—through demonstrating commitment to its Western partners.

In reflecting on the impacts of their participation, respondents indicated they had succeeded in achieving much of what they had had in mind when they had deployed, especially to Afghanistan. Soldiers received increased salaries, gained valuable experience working alongside U.S. and NATO member troops, and their performance on deployments earned them an international reputation of bravery, loyalty and dependability. While their deployments increased the GDF's military expertise, professionalism, and potentially their readiness to defend their own country, their participation still fell short of achieving the security guarantee that they sought for Georgia. Georgians viewed their sacrifice

¹⁷ According to one senior officer, only 10% of the active GDF falls into this category.

as a way of “paying the blood price” to oblige the U.S. and Western partners to protect Georgia in a future time of war. Several respondents expressed disappointment in the way the West had seemingly forgotten about Georgia since the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021.

NATO membership, and even a Membership Action Plan, have eluded Georgia, despite the GDF’s demonstrated interoperability on the battlefield, and our interviewees had adjusted their expectations accordingly. Most respondents conveyed that their hopes for NATO membership had been tempered over the years, and many acknowledged the geopolitical dilemma of escalating tensions between global powers. Nevertheless, most believed the continued focus on achieving NATO interoperability remained as strong and as relevant as ever because that goal and focus for development was helping Georgia toward efficient military operations, democratic governance, and further integration with the West. Some believed that Georgia was ready for NATO membership militarily, and that the shortcomings could be found in Georgia’s political institutions, while others believed the Ministry of Defense still had work to do – i.e., to fully adopt a Western military command structure and doctrine.

Respondents also reflected on the impacts of two decades of cooperation with the U.S. and NATO forces, including their Western education and training.

Junior Soldiers More Critical of the West

From our sample, junior soldiers, while clearly in favor of Euro-Atlantic integration, expressed their criticisms of or disappointments in Western military and political action more openly than did senior soldiers. This discrepancy could be attributed to a number of factors. Perhaps the more obvious factor is the difference in the level at which the soldiers operate. The lower-ranking officers and enlisted personnel are closer to the ground and are the technicians responsible for carrying out the basic tasks of the army. They participate in joint exercises, they risked their lives in Helmand province, Afghanistan, and they would be the first to be called upon in the case of another crisis at home. If they are aware of a functional problem at their level, they have a vested interest in fixing it; being honest with the researchers could be seen as one way of potentially having their voices heard and getting the problem addressed, since it is their own well-being (and success on the battlefield) at stake. As is often the case in the U.S. military, soldiers at the platoon and company level see problems that senior officers and NCOs are not always aware of.

Another consideration is that senior officers may be more invested in U.S.-Georgia cooperation and may have wanted to convey a diplomatic and cooperative attitude to American researchers so as to encourage positive relations to continue. Junior soldiers may have been less concerned with offending American researchers or conveying criticism, either because they were less diplomacy-minded; because they were younger and closer in age to the researchers and saw them as peers; or because culturally, the younger

generation of Georgians is more confident in the existing relationship with the West and does not fear damaging it.

Lastly, the discrepancy might also be a reflection of whether the interviewee had worked directly with U.S. military before or not. The high ranking officers who praised the U.S. military the most had spent time in the U.S. and in other NATO-member countries, and had worked directly with these militaries on their deployments.

Further Research

Conversations regarding Georgian soldiers' experiences with the U.S. and Western militaries illuminated a potential additional avenue for research on the effectiveness of IMET and FMF. Most respondents commented positively on the training or education they had received in the U.S., but at the same time, some indicated that patterns of Soviet doctrine, particularly centralized command and control, continued to appear in GDF leadership even following the completion of U.S.-based programs. This leads us to consider the effectiveness of such programs and how their impacts might be measured. One of the objectives of IMET (per the DoS website) was to enable "foreign militaries [to] improve their knowledge of U.S. military doctrine, strategic planning processes and operational procedures."¹⁸ Evidence from two of our interviews indicates that in order to achieve this objective for the GDF, a program such as IMET needs to be augmented with either training in-country or with deployment experience wherein Georgian forces are exposed to U.S. military doctrine in practice. For the officer who was inspired to learn English and to implement Mission Command as a result of his experience with U.S. troops on deployment, "practice" proved more effective than "theory" for initial exposure to U.S. military doctrine. His subsequent training and education in the U.S. were arguably more effective than they would have been otherwise because he was personally motivated to learn based on his experience. The deployment experience provided the context and the impetus for furthering his education.

References

"Auswärtiges Amt zur Lage in Mazar-i-Sharif." Auswärtiges Amt. November 11, 2016.
<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/161111-mazar-i-sharif/285154>.

¹⁸ See "International Military Education and Training (IMET)," U.S. Department of State Archive, 2001-2009, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/t/pm/65533.htm>

Gallis, Paul E. *NATO Enlargement: Partnership for Peace Members -- On the Road to Alliance Membership?*. CRS Report for Congress. Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division. March 24, 1995.

“Georgia: now the top non-NATO troop contributor in Afghanistan.” NATO. June 26, 2013.
https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_101633.htm.

“History,” Colonel Besik Kutateladze Sachkhere Mountain Training School Partnership Training and Education Center, Ministry of Defense of Georgia. 2015.
<https://mountainschool.mod.gov.ge/page/history?lang=en>.

“International Military Education and Training (IMET).” U.S. Department of State Archive. 2001-2009.
<https://2001-2009.state.gov/t/pm/65533.htm>.

Kipiani, Marion. “NATO and Georgia: The Ever Closer Partnership.” *Bilgesam Analysis / International Politics*. No: 1287. 2016

Mitchell, Lincoln A.. "Georgia Postbellum" *The Russia Portfolio*. Summer (May/June) 2009. 65-73.

Moroney, Jennifer D. P., Nancy E. Blacker, Renee Buhr, James McFadden, Cathryn Quantic Thurston, and Anny Wong. “APPENDIX A: Illustrative Train and Equip Programs.” In *Building Partner Capabilities for Coalition Operations*, 1st ed., 67–80. RAND Corporation, 2007.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg635a.14>.

Nichol, Jim. *Georgia [Republic] and NATO Enlargement: Issues and Implications*. Library of Congress Congressional Research Service, Washington DC, 2009.

Parker, Jessica, Joe Inwood and Steve Rosenberg. “EU awards Ukraine and Moldova candidate status,” BBC. June 23, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61891467>.

Sepashvili, Giorgi. “Second US-Trained Battalion on Guard,” *Civil Georgia*. October 5, 2003.
<https://civil.ge/archives/103330>.