

US Secretary of Defense Pays Official Visit to Georgia

By NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin is paying an official visit to Georgia. He arrived in Tbilisi on 18th of October.

"The visit of the US Secretary of Defense, from a major strategic partner state, reaffirms special ties between Georgia and America," the Ministry of Defense noted prior to Austin's arrival.

The US Secretary of Defense was met at the Tbilisi International Airport by Georgian Defense Minister Juansher Burchuladze and US Ambassador Kelly Degan. He wrote on his official Twitter page that the United States is committed to helping Georgia strengthen its defense capabilities and advance Euro-Atlantic integration.

Austin held meetings with Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and Defense Minister and reaffirmed US unwavering support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and underlined the US-Georgia Strategic Partnership in addressing regional and global security issues. The leaders discussed bilateral security co-operation and promoted regional co-operation in the Black Sea region.

The first visit of the Pentagon senior official started with the official welcoming ceremony at the Ministry of Defense of Georgia, after which they held a bilateral meeting. US-Georgia Strategic Partnership and Military Cooperation, progress made within the framework of Georgia's Defense Readiness Program, Black Sea Basin and Regional Security, Transformation of Georgian Defense Forces, strongly supported by official Washington, US growing support for Georgia's NATO membership, and International Security Assistance Force - were the issues discussed at the meeting.

During the press-briefing held after the meeting, the Secretary of Defense thanked the Defense Minister for the warm welcome and underscored that he wanted to be in Tbilisi personally, because 'the United States highly values Georgia



Ambassador Degan said that this visit is a 'sign of the continued close cooperation between the United States and Georgia.'

as a strong strategic partner'. He underscored that for more than 3 years now, the Georgian Defense Readiness Program has served as the basis for our efforts to support Georgia's defense skills and preparedness. The program will end by the end of this year and upcoming is the new Georgian Defense and Detention Initiative, which will be central to cooperation between the US Department of Defense on the one hand and the Georgian Ministry of Defense and the Georgian Defense

Forces on the other.

"This marks a really new, exciting phase in bilateral security cooperation between our countries. We will definitely use Georgia's defense program and continue to support institutional reforms in the defense sector. Strengthen the capabilities and skills necessary for effective containment and defense," Austin said adding that they will also support Georgia's interoperability with NATO. Colleagues also signed a memorandum

of understanding between the US Department of Defense and the Georgian Ministry of Defense, which reaffirms the importance of their work and builds on the tangible progress made under the Georgian Defense Readiness Program (GDRP) and takes the US-Georgia Strategic Partnership to a qualitatively new level, aiming to strengthen Georgia's defense and containment capabilities.

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"We have common interests that we will continue to work on, strengthening our partnership in the future. I want to convince the world of the wonderful relationship we have."



"I would like to make one issue clear and unequivocal: the US condemns Russia's occupation of Georgian territories and its attempts to gain influence over the Black Sea through various mechanisms. This is an important region and its security and stability are very important for the practical implementation of our common vision - for a united, free and peaceful society."

Exchange Rates: US Dollar - 3.1344; Euro - 3.6321; GBP - 4.3035; 100 Russian Ruble - 4.3981; Swiss Franc - 3.3852

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

MEPs, International Politicians, Former Georgian Officials Call for Saakashvili's Release

72 politicians, including MEPs, former Ministers of Georgia, former ambassadors and international partners are demanding the release of the third President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili. The joint letter is addressed to European Council President Charles Michel, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, and European Parliament President David Sassoli.

As signatories note, in 2012, President Saakashvili 'oversaw free and fair elections' and 'handed power to the new government peacefully and democratically.' According to the letter, On October 1, 2021, Saakashvili was arrested based on the charges that 'are known to be politically motivated' and have not been recognized internationally.

"No one moved to detain or extradite him as he continued to work and travel abroad, because

these charges were known to be part of an established pattern of political persecution," the letter reads.

The signatories believe that Saakashvili's arrest can only deepen the ongoing political crisis, which is the result of attempts to control the free press, to intimidate and surveil journalists, opposition politicians, activists, and even foreign diplomats, and to limit the space and resources for political opposition to the government.

"Every day that the Georgian government continues to pursue the politically motivated prosecution and imprisonment of its political rivals and predecessors is another day that worsens the cycle of extreme political polarization in Georgia, making unity of political forces for the sake of

strategic national priorities impossible," signatories note, adding that extreme political polarization undermines the democratic institutions of Georgia, making the country vulnerable to existential threats it still faces.

"We know where this pattern leads. There is no option of silence now," the signatories stressed.

It is noted in the open letter that since the justice system in Georgia lacks public trust, "some element of international observation must be put in place to help calm tensions as this process moves ahead."

The signatories highlighted that the EU-mediated April 19 agreement, which the Georgian Dream quit, clearly stated that "the era of politically motivated justice should finally end in

Georgia."

"Considering the pending application to the European Court of Human Rights by President Saakashvili, and to ensure the recovery of Georgia's democracy from the current political crisis, Saakashvili's imprisonment should be suspended until he faces trial, in fair judicial proceedings, for any charges levied against him," the letter reads.

Among the 72 signatories are 26 MEPs, 27 Lithuanian MPs, lawmakers from Poland, Estonia and the Czech Republic, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia Eka Tkeshelashvili, Former Minister of Defense David Sikharulidze, Former Ambassador of Georgia to the USA, Former Deputy Minister of Defense Batu Kutelia, and founder of the Georgian op-

position movement "Droa" Elene Khoshtaria.

The third president of Georgia, now a citizen of Ukraine who chairs the Executive Committee of the Ukrainian National Reforms Council, after being in political exile for eight years, was arrested in Tbilisi on October 1, ahead of October 2 municipal elections. Saakashvili faces several criminal charges in Georgia such as violent dispersal of anti-government mass protests on November 7, 2007, unlawful raiding of Imedi television company by riot police, exceeding official powers by using violence and appropriation or embezzlement of budget money in large quantities. He has been recently charged for illegally crossing the border from Ukraine to Georgia.



"Extreme political polarization erodes the democratic institutions that are Georgia's best security from the existential threats it still faces," reads the open letter.



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"It is a demonstration that we are united and committed to the success of this initiative, which underlines the long-standing policy of the US Department of Defense to assist Georgia, to defend itself, to curb aggression, and to move forward on the path to Euro-Atlantic integration. At the same time, the Georgian government needs to do its part to use the support of the US to

strengthen Georgia's democracy, to carry out the fundamental reforms necessary to bring Georgia closer to the West," Austin said.

Burchuladze informed that he introduced the 10-year development cycle to the US Secretary of Defense, which is focused on the development of territorial defense capabilities and sustainable combat readiness of the Georgian Defense Forces.

This approach will contribute to the implementation of the memorandum in the long run, proper budget planning and rational distribution of both state resources and the growing financial support from our strategic partner to Georgia.

"We talked about the multinational exercises in the United

States and Georgia and the prospects for the practical implementation of the Black Sea Security Concept. We emphasize that progress in this area is facilitated by the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Assessment Center and one of its leading components, the Combat Training Center, which is funded substantially by the US and already offers high-level training capabilities. And in the near future the center will be transformed into a world-class NATO standards training center."

Secretary Austin thanked the Georgian Defense Forces for their strong support for US and NATO efforts in Afghanistan, saying 'personally, as a veteran of the Afghanistan war, I am

especially grateful for everything you have done'.

"Georgia has made really great sacrifices - 32 killed, 293 wounded in Afghanistan. The United States will honor their sacrifice. We have deep respect for the Georgian people, for all the soldiers who served, for their families. Our collective effort in Afghanistan is another demonstration of the strength of our strategic partnership, our shared interests and values." The Secretary of Defense said.

When asked about the 3+3 format, Austin responded that before talking about any new platform, Russia, which occupies 20% of Georgia's territory, should respect the 2008 ceasefire agreement before talking about

any new platform, before we talk about the South Caucasus countries cooperating, they should strengthen regional cooperation.

Austin also visited one of the military bases of the Georgian Defense Forces and attended a joint US-Georgian military exercise.

The US Secretary of Defense started his visit to the Black Sea region from Georgia. He will also visit Ukraine and Romania and conclude a European tour in Brussels, at NATO Defense Ministerial.

US President Joe Biden nominated Lloyd Austin as Co-Secretary of Defense in December 2020. Austin officially took office on January 22, 2021, after the Senate approved his candidacy.

Weather

Tuesday, October 19

Day Partly Cloudy

High: 18°C

Night Partly Cloudy

Low: 11°C

Wednesday, October 20

Day Partly Cloudy

High: 15°C

Night Partly Cloudy

Low: 7°C

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