

US fudges Georgia NATO hope

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Georgia's Foreign Minister says his country is making progress in its efforts to find an alternative route to join NATO.

Grigol Vashadze was speaking in Washington where Georgia and the US signed a strategic partnership charter.

The charter is a framework document defining the principles of cooperation between the US and Georgia in defence, trade, energy security, development of democratic institutions and cultural exchanges.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Georgia was "a very important and valuable partner". She said bilateral relations between the two nations were based on common values on democracy, security and economic prosperity.

Rice added that the US "supports and will always support Georgia's sovereignty and its territorial integrity, as well as its Euro-Atlantic aspirations and its integration into the institutions of the Euro-Atlantic."

At the same time, she said, Georgia's integration into NATO "must depend on the wish of Georgians themselves and their ability to meet NATO standards."

Former Georgian MP Tsotne Bakuria who has spent the last five years in the US, says Georgian president Saakashvili depends on the US too much.

"Misha Saakashvili's biggest mistake is the fact that he never makes his own decisions, he always depends on somebody," Bakuria says.

It is suggested that promising Georgia NATO membership is one of the ways of keeping the country under American influence.

But Georgian Foreign Minister Vashadze says: "We appreciate what the US has been doing for us."

Tbilisi will regard the charter as a boost to its ambitions to join NATO. That's despite the US's failure on two occasions last year to get Georgia a membership action plan to the alliance. European countries blocked the move both times.

But disagreement with its allies isn't stopping the United States.

"If we are to ask the question of whether the charter is in part a substitute for the receiving of the Membership Action Plan this year - then yes," says Cory Welt from Eurasian Strategy

Project.

Foreign Minister Vashadze says he believes the incoming Obama administration was consulted on the deal.

This comes just a few months after Georgia's leadership unleashed a war in South Ossetia, in which innocent civilians were killed.

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