

NATO-Georgia Cooperation: A Rhetorical Engagement?

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In 2008, NATO officially embraced Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, declaring that one day the country would become a member of the alliance. Almost six years on, most policymakers - on both sides - agree that membership depends not on Georgia's political domain or security options, but rather on the geopolitical struggle between the major powers in the post-Soviet space, and most of all on the challenging NATO-Russia relationship. Kosovo's declaration of independence and the Bucharest Summit in 2008, at which Georgia was promised that it would one day gain membership, exacerbated the already complicated relations between Russia and the West. Both events were perceived by the Kremlin as a threat to Russia's strategic interests. Moreover, from Russia's perspective, both required a response. Russia's security dilemma culminated in August 2008 with the invasion of Georgia. This war led to the suspension of talks on Georgia's eventual NATO membership. Furthermore, the events in Ukraine, the financial crisis in Europe and U.S. policy in the Middle East and towards Iran have made it necessary to decelerate the Georgian NATO membership process. For now, NATO cannot compete with the Russian influence in the region. Consequently, it will pursue only a limited role in Georgia and in the South Caucasus more generally, keeping activities within the framework of the Individual Partnership Action Plans and engagement limited to the promotion of democracy, economic development, and military reform.



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At the NATO Prague Summit in 2002, Georgia officially declared its political openness to NATO membership. In 2008, the Alliance welcomed Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, stating that the country would become a member: 'MAP is the next step... Therefore we will now begin a period of intensive engagement... at a high political level to address the questions still outstanding pertaining to [its] MAP application'.¹ In view of the September 2001 terrorist attacks, this decision was in line with NATO's need for allies with similar values and interests. By June 2001, then U.S. President George W. Bush was already declaring that 'all of Europe's new democracies' from the Baltics to the Black Sea should have an equal chance to join Western institutions. In a similar vein, then-NATO Secretary General George Robertson announced that NATO 'expected' to launch the next round of enlargement at the Prague Summit in 2002.²

Ultimately, however, the trajectory of Georgia's NATO membership has been shaped by the international politics rather than the political will on the part of the Alliance. Six years after the 2008 NATO declaration and the Georgian-Russian war, it is widely agreed that membership depends not so much on Georgia's political domain or security options, but rather on the geopolitical struggle between the major powers in the post-Soviet space and, namely, on the challenging NATO-Russia relationship, which was brought to the fore by the August 2008 war.

The 2008 Georgian-Russian August war generated new sources of instability for the entire post-Soviet space, not only because it highlighted a new form of Russian revisionism, but also because it brought to the fore the limits of Western policies in what the Kremlin views as its sphere of influence.

The NATO-Georgia-Russia Triangle and the Security Dilemma

The 2008 Georgian-Russian August war generated new sources of instability for the entire post-Soviet space, not only because it highlighted a new form of Russian revisionism, but also because it brought to the fore the limits of Western policies in what the Kremlin views as its sphere of influence. Russia made it clear that it has its own interests in the neighboring countries, and demonstrated its readiness to embark on tough confrontation in order to achieve its goals. The war showed the international community that Moscow is the only 'game in town'.³ It exposed the inability of the West to prevent Russia from moving aggressively to restore its primacy

over the territory of the former Soviet Union.

But what forced Russia to act so decisively in its 'backyard'? The war highlighted the colliding foreign policy agendas of the major external actors in the region. Even though the U.S. and European responses to Russia had been firm in terms rhetoric but weak in reality - not only in the run-up to the war but also in the months and years preceding it - Moscow believed that the foreign policies of the Caucasus countries were based on Western strategy, giving rise to a security dilemma.

In his article, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma", Robert Jervis argues that the security efforts of one state sometimes cause a perception of insecurity for other states and that, consequently, 'states underestimate the degree to which they menace others... A state that is predisposed to see either a specific other state as an adversary, or others in general as a menace, will react more strongly'.⁴ Thus, the "dilemma" is that states tend to make decisions based not on realistic assessments, but instead on perceived insecurity. Whether or not this insecurity is real or perceived, it has the same general effect. Jervis considers that 'decision makers act in terms of the vulnerability that they feel, which can differ from the actual situation'.⁵

Since the late 1990s, Russia had warned that an incident like the Georgian-Russian war could happen if the West continued to pursue policies perceived by Moscow as threatening. Regardless, the EU, together with the US, created a security dilemma for Russia and established the conditions that led to the August 2008 war. The perception of insecurity was generated by several events: the statement in the 1999 NATO Strategic Concept calling for NATO to go 'out of area'⁶ in order to prevent and manage territorial conflicts; NATO's expansion including Baltic states in the Alliance; military action in the Balkans (without Russian approval); and the missile defense issue. Suspicion of NATO was reinforced in 2004 by the Istanbul NATO Summit declaration in which the Alliance asserted that it had the right to 'address effectively the threats our territory, forces and populations face from wherever they may come'.⁷

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1 NATO Bucharest Summit Declaration, 2008, See: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm.

2 Ph. H. Gordon, *NATO After 11 September*, Survival, 43 (4), Winter, 2001-2002, pp. 1-18.

3 N. Mikheilidze, *After the 2008 Russia-Georgia War: Implications for the Wider Caucasus*, The International Spectator, Vol. 44., No. 3, July-September 2009, pp. 27-42.

4 R. Jervis, Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma, World Politics, 30 (2), 1978, pp.167-214.

5 Ibid, p.9.

6 The Statement of Richard Lugar from Moore R.R. NATO's New Mission. Praeger Security International, p.28.

7 The Istanbul Declaration: Our Security in a New Era, Press release 28th June 2004, See: <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2004/p04-097e.htm>

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia's expectation was that NATO would remain a status-quo organization, as indeed Russia itself turned out to be - what Jervis calls 'an insecure defender of the status quo'.⁸ In particular, Moscow expected that NATO would not expand in the post-Soviet space, which the Kremlin considered its sphere of influence.⁹ Furthermore, any kind of military action near its border was perceived as a nuclear threat.¹⁰ Consequently, as of 2000, the Russian Military Doctrine began to undergo changes. In 2000, it stated that 'the expansion of military blocs and alliances to the detriment of the Russian Federation's military security' could destabilize the military-political situation in Russia.¹¹

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⁸ Ibid.

⁹ I. Malevich, *Rasshireniye NATO I Voennaya Doktrina Rossii, Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, 2010.

¹⁰ S. Blank, *Threats to Russian Security: The View from Moscow*, Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, 2000.

¹¹ M. De Haas, *Russia's Military Doctrine Development (2000-2010)*, in S. Blank, (ed) *Russian Military Politics and Russia's 2010 Defense Doctrine (1-62)*, Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, 2011.

¹² C. A. Wallander, *Russian Views on Kosovo: Synopsis of May 6 Panel Discussion*, Program on New Approaches to Russian Security, Harvard University, Davis Center for Russian Studies, Cambridge, Ma, Policy Memo No. 62, April 1999.

¹³ S. Blank, op. cit.

¹⁴ M. De Haas, op.cit.

In 2002, Georgia declared its willingness to join NATO. For Russia, Georgia's NATO membership or even the talks leading up to it would involve discussions about a new base for missile defense facilities in the Caucasus (indeed in 2007 Georgia declared its readiness to host a missile defense base on its territory). Moscow tolerated these various developments, namely the Kosovo precedent and the Baltic Countries' NATO membership, but the eventual NATO membership of Georgia (a country perceived to be a zone of "privileged interests" because of its geographical proximity to Russia's ally Armenia, Caspian resources and Iran) was considered a direct threat to national security. Consequently, the Kremlin concluded that its interests were being ignored, and that the time had come to send a strong message.

Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence and the NATO Bucharest Summit in 2008, where Georgia was promised that it would one day join the alliance, placed the already complicated relations between Russia and the West into the limelight. Both events were perceived by Kremlin as a threat to Russia's strategic nuclear deterrent, and as developments that requiring a response. Russia's security dilemma culminated in August of the same year with the invasion of Georgia. However, Russia did not want to confront NATO directly; rather, it wanted to defeat a country that was closely aligned with the US. Georgia was the perfect choice.¹⁵

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Indeed, Russian officials have made no secret of the fact that one of the real motivations behind their military actions in Georgia was the NATO membership issue. Specifically, in 2011, during a trip to the Southern Military District 17 headquarters in Vladikavkaz, then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev declared: 'If we had faltered in 2008, geopolitical arrangement would be different now and number of countries in respect of which attempts were made to artificially drag them into the North Atlantic Alliance, would have probably been there [in NATO] now'.¹⁶ Later on the same day when he met a group of journalists in Rostov-on-Don, he added: 'Today I already spoke with the army officers and I will tell you too, that it was of course a very difficult page in our recent history, but, unfortunately, it was absolutely necessary. And the fact that Russia's actions at the time were so tough has eventually secured a situation for us, which, despite of all the

¹⁵ The Russo-Georgian War and the Balance of Power, *Geopolitical Weekly*, August 12, 2008.

¹⁶ Medvedev: August War Stopped Georgia's NATO Membership, *Civil Georgia*, Tbilisi, 21 November 2011, See: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=24168>.

difficulties, is now quieter than it was... We have simply calmed some of our neighbors down by showing them that they should behave correctly in respect of Russia and in respect of neighboring small states. And for some of our partners, including for the North Atlantic Alliance, it was a signal that before taking a decision about expansion of the Alliance, one should at first think about the geopolitical stability. I deem these [issues] to be the major lessons of those developments in 2008'.¹⁷

Thus, the August War (also known as the Russian-Georgian war) was the consequence of Russia's perception of insecurity. Through its military action, Russia demonstrated its power in its near abroad, as well as the incapacity of external actors to prevent Moscow from conducting a military action against an independent state. Furthermore, it succeeded in suspending talks on Georgia's eventual membership in NATO and on the possibility of the U.S. deploying a missile defense facility in the Caucasus.

NATO's Challenges: Limits of Maneuvering, Absence of Strategy or Unwillingness to Expand?

Since the August 2008 War, Russia has consolidated its positions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Kremlin now has a monopoly over the conflict resolution process in the South Caucasus, having succeeded in marginalizing the UN, the OSCE and the EU. Russia, since recognizing the self-declared independent of

the two Georgian separatist regions, has signed agreements with Abkhazia and South Ossetia to set up military bases there for an initial term of 49 years, with possible extensions for an additional 15 years,¹⁸ plus an agreement on bilateral cooperation to protect Abkhazia's borders, allowing Russia to guard over 350 kilometers of the de facto republic's border.¹⁹ In December 2013, Russian President Vladimir Putin ratified free trade agreements with both breakaway regions.²⁰

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In the short and medium terms, we should not expect a different approach from Russia towards Georgia and the two de facto republics. For the most part, the Russian tactic will seek to maintain the status quo around the conflict resolution process.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Abkhaz parliament ratifies military base deal with Russia, RIANOVOSTI, 27 December 2011, See: <http://en.ria.ru/world/20111227/170516553.html>.

¹⁹ Abkhazian president to sign agreement on Russian military base, RIANOVOSTI, 15 February 2010, See: <http://en.ria.ru/russia/20100215/157891876.html>.

²⁰ Putin ratifies free trade agreements with Abkhazia, South Ossetia, The Voice of Russia, 23 December, 2013, See: http://voiceofrussia.com/news/2013_12_23/Putin-ratifies-free-trade-agreements-with-Abkhazia-S-Ossetia-6213/.

tic will seek to maintain the status quo around the conflict resolution process. Moscow will continue to consolidate its economic and military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia; this will allow to the Kremlin to increase its political position throughout the region. Such dynamics cannot lead to any real changes to Georgia's NATO integration process, as the actors involved have very limited room for maneuver. Thus, as long as the Abkhazian and South Ossetia conflicts remain unresolved with Russia entrenched in the de facto republics, Georgia's NATO membership will not happen.

Another barrier to Georgia's NATO membership is the current U.S. policy in the South Caucasus and its relations with Russia. Since the election of President Obama, there has been a significant shift in U.S. policy towards the region. Obama opted for dialogue with Russia in the framework of his "reset" policy. Furthermore, U.S. policies towards Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and the Middle East indicate Washington's withdrawal from the Caucasus. Washington needs Moscow more as a partner than a competitor in dealing with all these other issues. The U.S. policy for balancing China also requires keeping Russia reasonably happy. Given this context, Georgia is and will remain a marginal country for the United States.

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Furthermore, NATO has no clear strategy for dealing with the South Caucasus; the member states have different views regarding the Alliance's enlargement policy. Germany, France and Italy are among those skeptical of Euro-Atlantic expansion towards the East. They consider Georgia's membership as a source of conflict with Russia, and feel that Tbilisi is seeking membership in order to gain protection through NATO's Article 5.

However, nobody has answered the question of whether NATO membership is even possible for a country that has two separatist regions and a military presence of the third state in those zones. What will happen to Abkhazia and South Ossetia if Georgia joins NATO? There are no discussions on the political effects of the NATO-Georgia partnership on the parties. It is unclear whether NATO considers Article 5 of relevance in case of Georgian membership. Matlary argues that the cost-benefit calculus shows that NATO's security gain from a larger geopolitical expansion in the post-Soviet space is less than the obligation incurred by Article 5.²¹ Similarly, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter

²¹ H. J. Matlary, Partnership to the East and South: A Win-Win Policy, E. Hakan et. al. (eds) NATO: The Power of Partnerships, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2011, p. 68.

Steinmeier considers that three “goods” determine the case for or against any candidate’s accession to NATO: ‘the good for the candidate country, good for NATO, and good for pan-European security’. Georgia seems to fail on all counts.²² Meanwhile the partnership continues to be driven more by commitments, single programs oriented towards the development of the military sector and democracy and, most of all, rhetoric.

Then why the NATO-Georgia partnership?

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It seems that the Georgian government has now realized the limits of its membership prospects; Georgian rhetoric has diminished and the idea that NATO could address the country’s security concerns has vanished. Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili has declared that if NATO refuses to grant Georgia a Membership Action Plan (MAP) now, it will not be a “principle” issue. ‘Several years ago the previous authorities created unheard of high expectation in the public and then we were left... disappointed. We are not going to do the same,’ he stated.²³ There is nonetheless an awareness that even if membership is not possible, the process of partnership will at least have been beneficial for the internal development of Georgia.

Thus, the membership issue only appears in the official statements of Western politicians. Officially, NATO prevents any state from exercising a veto over an aspiring NATO member country. Indeed, at the 2012 Chicago Summit, NATO was keen to re-affirm that:

‘in accordance with Article 10 of the Washington Treaty, NATO’s door will remain open to all European democracies which share the values of our Alliance, which are willing and able to assume the responsibilities and obligations of membership, which are in a position to further the principles of the Treaty, and whose inclusion can contribute to security in the North Atlantic Area... We reaffirm our strong commitment to the Euro-Atlantic integration of the partners that aspire to join the Alliance in accordance with previous decisions taken at the Bucharest, Strasbourg-Kehl and Lisbon Summits... At the 2008 Bucharest Summit we agreed that Georgia will be-

22 A. Lobjakas, NATO lacks the Stomach for South Caucasus Fight, Caucasus Analytical Digest, No. 5, 16 April 2009.

23 PM Comments on NATO MAP, Civil Georgia, Tbilisi, 16 January, 2014, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=26861>.

come a member of NATO and we reaffirm all elements of that decision.’²⁴

Thus, although a political commitment to eventual membership of Georgia was taken on at the Bucharest Summit in 2008, NATO’s intention will remain on paper. Indeed, following Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea, President Obama declared that Georgia (along with Ukraine) is not on the path to joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and that there are no immediate plans for NATO expansion.²⁵ The formal reason for postponing the MAP issue for Georgia will change over time. Once it was the 2012 parliamentary and 2013 presidential elections; in the future it will be further development of democracy and conflict resolution. In regions such as the South Caucasus, rife with political conflict and difficulty, it is not hard to find reasons to decelerate integration processes.

Conclusion

Thus the Ukraine crisis, the Georgian-Russian war, Russia’s return to its “near abroad”, the financial crisis in Europe, U.S. policy in the Middle East and towards Iran have collectively made it necessary to put the brakes on Georgia’s NATO membership process. Furthermore, it is still not clear whether all NATO members have the same interests in the South Caucasus. What is evident is that NATO is refusing to take responsibilities in a context where relations with Russia could be challenged. For now, NATO cannot compete with Russia’s influence in the region. Therefore, it will pursue only a limited role in Georgia and in the South Caucasus more generally, keeping activities in the framework of the Individual Partnership Action Plans (IPAP) and engagement limited to promotion of democracy, economic development, and military reform.

However, all this begs a question: why this partnership between Georgia and NATO? NATO membership serves only as a stimulus for political and economic development and for reinforcing democracy in Georgia. Furthermore, the country benefits from NATO military projects. Even without full membership, NATO programs contribute to security in the Caucasus by building political and military bridges between member and non-member states, accelerating military reform and creating a new genera-

24 Chicago Summit Declaration, Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Chicago on 20 May 2012.

25 V. Rukhadze, Georgia is reeling after President Obama’s NATO Statement, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume, 11 (69), April 11, 2014.

tion of military officers far from the Soviet military mentality.²⁶ On other hand, ‘because Russia’s future policy toward NATO remain difficult to predict, the Allies must pursue the goal of co-operation while also guarding against the possibility that Russia could decide to move in a more adversarial direction’.²⁷

26 S. E. Cornell, *Regional Security in the South Caucasus: The Role of NATO*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Johns Hopkins University-SAIS, available at <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/nato.pdf>.

27 NATO 2020: Assured Security; Dynamic Engagement. Analysis and Recommendations of the Group of Experts on a new Strategic Concept for NATO, 17 May 2010.