

Implications of Georgian NATO membership for the South Caucasus

In a speech made in November 2005, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer declared that “the door is open” for Georgian membership.¹ Although recent events in the country have cast doubt on the strength of government institutions and President Mikheil Saakashvili’s commitment to democracy, NATO and American officials insist that Georgia will almost certainly become a member in due time. In order to become a member state, Tbilisi must make military and political reforms. However, the extent of these changes and the long-term commitment of the Georgian government to reform remain to be seen. Should Georgia join NATO, it will represent a significant shift of power in the Caucasus. The change in status will have repercussions for each state in the Caucasus.

The two key issues that will be affected by Georgian entry into NATO are its internal secessionist conflicts and its testy relations with Russia. To the Georgian government, the two issues are one and the same. They believe that Russia is the root of separatist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Tbilisi alleges that Russia supplies secessionists with arms, money, and refuge.² Georgia also accuses Russia of promoting secessionist sentiment in order to gain influence by rushing to Tbilisi’s rescue with military bases and peacekeeping troops. The Georgian government hopes that NATO membership will prevent Russian interference in Georgian affairs, thereby also breaking the back of the secessionist movements. Although this stance will likely prevent overt Russian interference, it may be oversimplified, and it also bears a degree of danger.

¹ Lobjakas, Ahto. “Georgia: NATO Chief Says ‘The Door is Open’” *Radio Free Europe*. <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/11/d4cc1f10-0b09-45f0-9aa9-6a9c9ee0f373.html>. 28 Nov 05. (Accessed 10 Nov 07).

² Karaganov, Sergei. “Moscow and Tbilisi: Beginning Anew”. *Russia in Global Affairs*. Vol 3 No 1. 2004.

Russian disengagement from Abkhazia and South Ossetia may provoke separatists. Russia supplies the breakaway regions with heavily subsidized fuel, and Russian peacekeepers make important contributions to the local economies.³ There was a great deal of dissatisfaction among Ajarian merchants due to the loss of steady customers when the Russian military base in Batumi closed. Furthermore, the Abkhaz and South Ossetians view Russia as their guardian, and a Russian withdrawal will make them upset, particularly if Georgian forces replace them. Russia has also extended citizenship and issued passports to many Abkhaz and Ossetians.⁴ Moscow could raise a ruckus if it claims that Georgia is not respecting the rights of its citizens. Having Abkhaz and Ossetian citizens, along with ethnic Russians living in Georgia, gives Russia a reason to intervene in Georgian affairs. One positive aspect of NATO membership for Georgia in this regard is that Russian intervention on behalf of Abkhaz, Ossetians, and ethnic Russians will take the form of political, economic, or diplomatic action rather than the use of force.

If Russian forces leave Abkhazia and South Ossetia, they will not be replaced by Western forces. NATO officials have made it clear that although they may be willing to consider Georgia for membership without its internal conflicts resolved, it will not become involved in their resolution. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe will be the only international organization charged with resolving the disputes.⁵ This may not prevent NATO from becoming involved in the conflicts. United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon recently criticized the Georgian government for constructing two new NATO-standard military

³ King, Charles. "A Rose Among Thorns: Georgia Makes Good". *Foreign Affairs*. Vol 83 No 2. 2004.

⁴ Nishimura, Megumi. "The OSCE and ethnic conflicts in Estonia, Georgia, and Tajikistan: A search for sustainable peace and its limits". *European Security*. Vol 8 No 1.

⁵ "Nato-Georgia relations". <http://www.nato.int/issues/nato-georgia/practice.html>. (Accessed 20 Nov 07).

bases within miles of the Abkhaz and Ossetian borders.⁶ These bases are currently being used only by Georgian units, but should NATO forces be stationed there, it could be seen as a tacit sign of Western support for Georgian military operations in the area.



This map details the location of closed Russian military bases, as well as the Russian base at Gudauta which Russia claims is closed, but refuses to allow inspectors to verify this. The white boxes indicate the location of newly constructed NATO-standard Georgian military bases.

One concern that has been raised by analysts is the prospect of hostilities between NATO and Russian forces. The Kremlin recently announced that they would raise two elite alpine brigades and station them in the mountains along Russia's border with Georgia in response to the increasing Western interest in Georgia.⁷ In Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, NATO has placed a high priority on securing the airspace of its members. Georgian officials routinely accuse Russian aircraft of violating Georgian airspace, most notably in the recent missile incident in the north of the country. The Georgian air force is not equipped with aircraft capable

⁶ Corso, Molly. "Military Base Construction Fuels Georgian-South Ossetian Tension". <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav032707.shtml>. 27 March 07. (Accessed 7 Nov 07).

⁷ Corso. "Georgia's NATO progress 'irreversible'". <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?ID=16725>. 28 Sept 06. (Accessed 18 Nov 07).

of intercepting Russian jets, so the responsibility for securing the skies over Georgia will fall to NATO aircraft. Additionally, Moscow has already lodged complaints with the US over intelligence-gathering flights along Georgia's northern border. American U-2 reconnaissance aircraft and AWACS radar intelligence aircraft have been flying sorties from Georgia for several years.⁸ While it is unlikely that either side will resort to open combat, it is possible that an event like the China spy plane incident will occur. That incident occurred when an American surveillance aircraft was intercepted by two Chinese jets on the border of their airspace, and amidst the aerial posturing, a Chinese jet and the surveillance aircraft collided, killing the Chinese pilot, causing the American crew to fall into Chinese hands, and sparking an international incident. Additionally, the Russian air force has recently become much more confrontational with the West. Russian bombers have flown missions over Scotland and an US carrier group in the Pacific, and Russian fighter jets have been sent to intercept NATO aircraft flying well within international airspace. The prospect of aerial confrontations between Russian and NATO aircraft must be taken into consideration should Georgia join NATO.

Russian officials have expressed their deep concerns about American strategic objectives in Georgia. Several senior Russian officers have suggested that the US intends to station components of a missile defense shield in Georgia. Although the Bush administration has asked the Czech Republic to host an anti-missile radar system, it has also indicated that it would like to station a radar base in the Caucasus, ostensibly to track Iranian missiles.⁹ Of course, Georgia does not need to be a member of NATO to host the American project. Agreeing to host the radar

⁸ Socor, Vladimir. "Security Priorities in the Black Sea-Caspian Region" *Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies*. <http://www.georgiaemb.org/DisplayMedia.asp?id=229>. 22 Oct 03. (Accessed 22 Nov 07).

⁹ "Georgia considering hosting U.S. missile defense system". *RIA Novosti*. 05 Feb 07.

site will tie Georgia more closely to the US, and will likely improve its chances of gaining NATO membership.

These military developments will impact Georgia in a number of ways. In terms of Georgian foreign relations, its relationship with Russia has already deteriorated, and will deteriorate farther should Georgia become a NATO member. This breakdown in relations will likely result in border tensions, both on the ground and in the air. Although NATO officials have stated that they will not become directly involved in the breakaway regions, the military assistance and reforms that the Georgian military must undergo to join NATO will put Tbilisi in a much stronger position to deal with the breakaway regions, whether through negotiations or through force. Additionally, the removal of Russian forces from Georgia, coupled with NATO's mutual protection guarantee, will diminish Russia's ability to influence Georgian affairs.

Politically, many members of NATO have expressed their reservations about democracy in Georgia. Although the 2003 "Rose Revolution" endeared the country to many Western politicians, President Saakashvili has become increasingly authoritarian. The recent declaration of emergency rule by Tbilisi led to a statement by Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer that "the imposition of Emergency Rule, and the closure of media outlets in Georgia, a Partner with which the Alliance has an Intensified Dialogue, are of particular concern and not in line with Euro-Atlantic values."¹⁰ Western officials have also expressed doubts about the fairness of elections in Georgia, along with a number of human rights concerns. Significantly, while NATO statements on the membership process in 2003 and 2004 highlighted military standards and compatibility with Western forces as the biggest obstacle to overcome, updates on Georgia's

¹⁰ "Statement by the Secretary General on the situation in Georgia". <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2007/p07-114e.html>. 08 Nov 07. (Accessed 18 Nov 07).

progress towards membership lately have expressed that democracy and human rights are the biggest concern. Specifically, NATO officials have stressed the need for free and fair elections, as well as strong democratic institutions (particularly an independent judiciary) in Georgia.¹¹

These concerns may cause changes in Tbilisi. Saakashvili has already made reforms in order to placate NATO. It remains to be seen, however, whether these reforms have any real substance. An English-language website set up by the Georgian government for members of the Western media trumpets a variety of economic, security, judicial, legislative, and environmental reforms. In the area of security, much detail is given to the overhaul of the police forces, anticorruption initiatives among military and law enforcement officials, restructuring the Georgian military, and improving training.¹² Interestingly, many of the reforms that were intended to limit corruption and streamline the command structure of security forces did so by placing them under the direct command of the president. Significantly, although the press releases speak glowingly of democratic progress in Georgia, the details of democratic reform are vague. In response to the findings of an advisory committee hired by the Georgian government, Tbilisi promises to improve the power of parliamentary committees and liaisons, and makes a vague promise to improve public access to information. As for judicial reform, a major concern of NATO, the government promises to increase the number of courts and judges, remove the right of original jurisdiction from the Court of Cassation (the highest court in Georgia), improve the quality of lawyers, and increase judges' pay.¹³

¹¹ "Georgia's Murky Politics". *The Economist*. 10 Oct 07.

¹² "Security sector reform—ISAB report 2005". <http://www.georgiawelcomesusa.com/isab.htm>. March 2005. (Accessed 18 Nov 07).

¹³ "Reforms within the judiciary". http://www.georgiawelcomesusa.com/judicial_reforms.htm. 2005. (Accessed 18 Nov 07).

Some analysts have suggested that the likelihood of any meaningful move towards democracy in Georgia is slim. Thomas de Waal writes in *Internationale Politik* that “the leaders of the South Caucasian countries take steps towards introducing some reforms, while taking care that nothing they do threatens their own survival. They hang onto their membership in the Council of Europe by holding elections that, although not fully fair, are not so outrageous as to earn them the threat of expulsion.”¹⁴ In the same article, de Waal points out Saakashvili’s Janus-face. To foreigners, he presents the image of an idealistic democrat, focused on rooting out corruption and dedicated to peace. Yet at home Saakashvili is a staunch nationalist who is not particularly tolerant of ethnic minorities, or of dissenting voices. Saakashvili’s announcement this week that he would resign as president in order to stand for re-election is an example of this. Although he is acting in accordance with Georgian law by resigning, which is intended to prevent an incumbent president from interfering on his own behalf in an election, it is very likely that he will again be president after the election. Although the headline the on the BBC reads “Georgian leader resigns for poll,”¹⁵ further down in the text of the article are references to Saakashvili’s decision to shut down an independent television station, as well as his nine day declaration of emergency rule. Even though Saakashvili is giving up the title of president, he and his supporters have already set things into motion that will make him the president again.

To be cynical however, it is important to note that NATO’s ideological commitment to democracy is not absolute. Both Turkey and Greece have experienced several military coups while NATO members, and neither country faced expulsion or other serious penalties. There have been a few parties that have called for greater discipline and penalties for NATO member

¹⁴ De Waal, Thomas. “Rethinking Global Order: Arms Race in the Caucasus”. *Internationale Politik*. Vol 8. 2007.

¹⁵ “Georgian leader resigns for poll”. *BBC News Online*. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7111745.stm>. 25 Nov 07. (Accessed 25 Nov 07).

states when it comes to democratic practices, particularly in light of NATO's expansion east into the former Soviet Union. However, these voices are few and scattered. Practical considerations, such as Georgia's strategic location close to Russia, Iran, and the Caspian oil fields, will doubtlessly play a role in how far NATO will pressure Tbilisi to make genuine reforms.

Lastly, Georgia will make some economic gains from joining NATO. Georgia is in some ways naturally inclined to Western trade, due to its Black Sea ports. Georgian ports on the Black Sea enable the country to trade with NATO members Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey, as well as the Mediterranean countries past the Turkish Straits. Georgia could find new markets for its products there. It is fortunate that Georgia has both land and sea links to the west, because economic relations with Russia have suffered greatly as a result of Tbilisi's cozying up to the West. Russia has banned the importation of some Georgian goods, notably wine. During crises, such as the 2006 incident where Georgia seized four Russian military officers on suspicion of being spies, Russia has shown a willingness to halt trade with Georgia. The border was closed, flights to Tbilisi were cancelled, and the Duma passed a bill to ban money transfers to Georgia.¹⁶

Economic reforms, including lowering taxes, deregulation, and the privatization of government-owned businesses are helping to integrate the Georgian economy into the West. These efforts have yielded results. The World Bank named Georgia as the world's top reforming country in 2006, and the country recently was ranked the eighteenth-best country in the world to run a business in.¹⁷ It is very likely that Saakashvili will remain dedicated to economic reform, given his country's economic growth and the fact that economic reform does not threaten his hold on power. Between Tbilisi's economic reforms and the building hostility of Russia towards

¹⁶ Vaisman, Daria. "Dispute with Russia Threatens Georgia". *New York Times*. 05 Oct 06.

¹⁷ "Economy Rankings". *The World Bank Group*. <http://www.doingbusiness.org/economyrankings/>. 2007. (Accessed 23 Nov 07).

Georgia as a result of its NATO bid, Georgia is becoming economically tied to the West. In the future, a NATO-oriented Georgia will likely develop close economic ties with the West, will witness a decrease in the importance of trade of Russia, and will experience an influx of foreign investment. Georgia will move beyond the Caucasus and become part of a global economy.

If Georgia becomes a NATO member, it will have significant implications for neighboring Armenia and Azerbaijan. Although Georgia has friendly relations with both countries, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, coupled with the each country's relationship with regional powers, makes the situation more complex. NATO has approached all three countries and invited them to participate in a number of programs, including pre-membership programs. All three countries have participated in the Individual Partnership Action Plan and Partnership for Peace programs, which establish bilateral ties between individual states and NATO.¹⁸ NATO involvement in the Caucasus beyond basic cooperation agreements varies, however. While Georgia has enthusiastically embraced a path to NATO membership, Armenia has ruled out becoming a member state, and Azerbaijan has not definitively declared one way or the other.¹⁹ These differences will influence the stance that NATO takes towards each country, and the potential impact that Georgian membership will have on the Caucasus.

Armenia in particular will be affected by Georgian membership in NATO. Should Georgia become a member state, it will enable the West to influence Armenia. This will lead to a change in the region's dynamics. Armenians tend to consider Russia to be their protector, even if it is sometimes less than reliable. President Kocharyan has stressed that developing ties with the West will not harm Armenia's relationship with Russia. However, in terms of security and

¹⁸ "Partnership for Peace". <http://www.nato.int/pfp/sig-cntr.htm>. 11 Jan 07. (Accessed 24 Nov 07).

¹⁹ Fuller, Elizabeth. "Azerbaijan: Baku Seems Ambivalent About NATO Membership". *Radio Free Europe*. 22 Mar 07.

geography, maintaining ties with both could be difficult. Armenia is geographically isolated from Russia, and the growing Western influence in Georgia and Azerbaijan could spill over into the country.

Should conflict resume with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh or the Armenian-occupied territory in western Azerbaijan, Armenia could be at a distinct disadvantage. Russia is the primary supplier of arms to Armenia. If Georgia joins NATO, the West could urge Tbilisi to forbid the movement of Russian arms through Georgian territory and airspace. Western countries may have an interest in preventing the movement of Russian arms to Armenia. The West may look favorably at the opportunity to dent the Russian arms export business. It is also possible that some countries may seek to pressure Armenia into moving closer to the West by cutting them off from Russian support. Most importantly, if Armenia threatens the flow of Azerbaijani oil (which is a primary goal of the Armenian military should conflict resume²⁰) the West will be very anxious to ensure that its flow is uninterrupted. If Georgia's borders are closed to Russian arms, Armenia's options will be extremely limited. Azerbaijan obviously will not permit arms destined for Armenia to pass, and Turkey, out of historical animosity, solidarity with the Azerbaijanis, and allegiance to NATO, likely will not allow Russian weapons to move through its territory or airspace either. This would leave the Armenians with the unpleasant choice of flying or shipping arms from Russia around the Caucasus and up through Iran's narrow border with Armenia. This could dramatically change the balance of power between Armenia and Azerbaijan, particularly if Azerbaijani forces could seize the corridor between southwestern Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, thereby cutting off Armenia from Iran.

²⁰ Libaridian, Gerard. Lecture. Nov 2007.

Azerbaijan will also be affected by Georgian entry into NATO. NATO investment in Georgia increases the security and confidence in the oil pipeline that runs from Azerbaijan through Georgia to Turkey. Azerbaijan's oil reserves guarantee that the West will attempt to maintain good relations with Baku, even if their democratic record is less than stellar. The lavish welcome that President Bush put on for Aliyev when he made a state visit to Washington DC last year points to the high standing of Azerbaijan in the West.²¹ The high price of oil also guarantees the Azerbaijani government quite a bit of money, giving the country a degree of insulation against outside coercion. The disadvantage of being an oil supplier for the West is that will put Azerbaijan directly into competition with Russia. That may also drive Azerbaijan closer to the West as its profile builds in the region.

The Azerbaijani government has been noncommittal on the issue of NATO membership. President Ilham Aliyev may consider the issue of NATO membership to be leverage in negotiations with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh and the Azerbaijani territory held by Armenian forces. Although Azerbaijan joining NATO would give the country a definite advantage against Armenia, it would be a risky proposition. Azerbaijan is certainly a less than democratic country, and the reforms that NATO would require from President Aliyev would most likely be asking too much of him. Additionally, Azerbaijan enjoys relatively friendly relations with Iran, which would obviously be harmed by NATO membership. Baku does not want to act as a staging area for military action against Iran. The fact that there is a sizable Azeri population in northern Iran also is a factor, as Aliyev will come under domestic pressure if Azeris are killed in an attack. It is also possible that Tehran would retaliate, either against

²¹ "Azerbaijani president to meet with Bush". *USA Today*. 28 April 06.

Azerbaijan or against the Iran's Azeri population if a strike is launched from Azerbaijani territory.

Despite Russia's traditional role as the dominant power in the Caucasus, it is very likely that it will have to be content, at best, with sharing influence in the future. Although neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan have been enthusiastic about applying for NATO membership, it is likely that they will be drawn further into the Western sphere of influence. In Armenia's case, physical isolation from Russia and Western influence from its neighbors will become a prominent factor in its policies. Armenia will still likely maintain strong ties with Russia though. Azerbaijan's future is staked on the Caspian—Georgia—Turkey pipeline. The pipeline will tie Azerbaijan to Georgia and Turkey, along with all of the NATO members receiving the product. It also makes Azerbaijan a serious contender in the oil export market, which puts it in Russia's crosshairs. Having Russia as an economic competitor may push Baku closer to NATO. The benefits of increased Western trade with Georgia should also spill over into Armenia and Azerbaijan, creating more ties between the South Caucasus and the West.

Detractors of the NATO plan to expand into Georgia claim that it would create a miniature cold war in the Caucasus. Yet many historians and political scientists now believe that the Cold War standoff was actually quite stable, and even beneficial in some ways.²² In a bipolar system, the two powers tend to balance each other out. If the leaders of the South Caucasus states are wily enough, they could take advantage of the absence of one clear regional power. Like Egypt during the Cold War, they could play both the US and Russia for their own benefit, leaning one way or the other as their needs suit them.

²² Mearsheimer, John. "Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War". *Atlantic Monthly*. Vol 266 No 2.

Although there are many uncertainties about the effect of Georgia entering into NATO, there are many indications that it may destabilize the region. Georgian relations with Russia will mostly likely deteriorate severely. Armenia and Azerbaijan will be influenced to varying degrees by the growing Western presence. Conflict may become more likely, whether between Georgia and separatists, NATO and Russia, NATO and Iran, or Armenia and Azerbaijan. On the other hand, one could argue that one man's stability is another man's oppression. Having NATO in the Caucasus could loosen Russia's hold on the region, and reduce the political and economic dependency of the Caucasus states.

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