



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR  
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

## NATO-GEORGIAN RELATIONS IN THE COMING DECADE

IRAKLI SIRBILADZE

# 186

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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## **EXPERT OPINION**

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**2022**



The publication is made possible with the support of the US Embassy in Georgia. The views expressed in the publication are the sole responsibility of the author and do not in any way represent the views of the Embassy.

Technical Editor: Artem Melik-Nubarov

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ISSN 1512-4835

ISBN

## Introduction

At the 2022 Madrid Summit, NATO unveiled its new Strategic Concept.<sup>1</sup> The update of the 2010 Strategic Concept<sup>2</sup> was naturally necessitated by the momentous developments seen in the 2010s such as, among others, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the more outward-looking and ambitiously rising China, Brexit, the election of Donald Trump and its attendant implications for transatlantic relations as well as the election of Joe Biden as the President of the United States and the reinvigoration of the transatlantic and the democracy agenda. The renewal of the Strategic Concept seemed apt amid Russia's re-invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 that put NATO-Russian relations at a historic low. NATO was forced to let go of its desire to forge 'a true strategic partnership' with Russia and instead referred to Russia as "the most significant and direct threat to the Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area."<sup>3</sup> NATO's new agenda for 2030 is also full of issues that go beyond the immediate geopolitical challenges. Issues such as climate change, technology, healthcare, space and cyberspace are equally significant for the Alliance's ability to meet the challenges of the new decade.

The plethora of conventional and non-conventional threats requires the Alliance to consolidate internally but also expand its partnerships with non-member states and organizations. Part of that endeavor is NATO's relations with Georgia – an aspirant state that faces an aggressive Russia but has been kept in the waiting room together with Ukraine since the Bucharest Summit in 2008. Georgian-NATO relations have been expanding to a new high since 2008, yet NATO has taken an approach of everything-but-Article 5 vis-à-vis Georgia and Ukraine; that is, the extension of strong political, security and defense support but refusing to invite the two states to become members of the Alliance.<sup>4</sup>

The Madrid Summit Declaration as well as the new Strategic Concept demonstrate that NATO has not changed its approach even amid Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Other things being equal, NATO's relations with Georgia in the coming decade will likely proceed on the basis of everything-but-membership while new forms of cooperation could be envisaged to anchor Georgia in NATO's geopolitical core. Failing membership indeed poses threats for Georgia's national security but Georgia's ever-closer political and practical cooperation with NATO and its member states sends

Russia the message that aggression against Georgia will come with severe economic and political costs. While this helps Georgia mitigate – but not fully eliminate – challenges to its sovereignty and national security, it will remain ever more vulnerable to external challenges if the country fails to unite internally and work towards improving democratic governance and societal resilience.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. It first reviews the evolution of NATO-Georgia practical and political cooperation over the decades. It then briefly discusses the underlying reasons behind NATO's decision not to advance Georgia on its membership path. An analysis of the decisions of the Madrid Summit and their implications for Georgia then follows. The paper concludes with a discussion of how Georgia will be best placed in order to navigate the challenging new decade.

### **NATO-Georgian Cooperation Prior to the 2022 Madrid Summit**

NATO-Georgian relations have been progressing since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The evolution in relations can be best grouped into four periods: 1) post-independence to the Rose Revolution, 2) Rose Revolution to the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, 3) the Russian-Georgian war to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and 4) the post-annexation of Crimea.<sup>5</sup> Each of the periods delivered new benchmarks and saw the further improvement of relations, particularly since Russia's annexation of Crimea which transformed NATO's own perception of security.

In the period of *post-independence to the Rose Revolution*, Georgia joins the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) in 1992 which transformed into the Euro-Atlantic Cooperation Council (EAPC) in 1997. The key framework of relations in this period is the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program which Georgia joined in 1994. In 2002, Georgia officially voices its desire to join the Alliance while the country agrees the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with NATO in 2004.<sup>6</sup>

In the period between *the Rose Revolution to the Russian-Georgian war in 2008*, the Intensified Dialogue is launched in 2006. This is period in which Georgia commits to contribute to NATO and the US-led international security missions. At the Bucharest Summit in April 2008, the decision is made to deny Georgia and Ukraine the Membership Action Plan (MAP) but grant them the promise that they will one day join the Alliance.<sup>7</sup>

*Following the Russian-Georgian war in 2008*, the NATO-Georgian Commission (NGC) is introduced, taking political relations between NATO and Georgia to a new high. The Annual National Program (ANP) replaces the IPAP as the framework for relations. In 2010, the NATO Liaison Office is opened to strengthen the cooperation.<sup>8</sup> However, the most consequential upgrade in the bilateral relations comes *following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014*. At the Wales Summit in 2014, Georgia becomes part of NATO's newly launched Defense and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative (DCB) and the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP) is endorsed. It is in this period that Georgia is designated as an Enhanced Opportunities Partner and becomes part of the Alliance's strategy to strengthen its presence in the Black Sea.<sup>9</sup> The SNGP initiative is refreshed in 2020 with the aim of further improving interoperability with the Alliance.<sup>10</sup>

The ever-expanding relations between NATO and Georgia are, however, short of the outcome Georgia sees as its ultimate foreign policy objective – securing MAP and membership in the Alliance. The paper will now turn to the discussion of the factors that hinder Georgia from achieving its goals to this end.

### **Factors Behind NATO's Everything-but-Membership Approach**

The question of NATO enlargement has been ever-present in both policy and academic circles since the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>11</sup> Russia's possible reaction to NATO's eastern enlargement has been at the heart of the argument alongside the risk of a NATO-Russia confrontation and the fear of an ensuing nuclear conflict. The proponents of NATO's eastern enlargement see NATO as a stabilizer, citing the examples of NATO's enlargement to Central and Eastern European states that now enjoy NATO's protection.

The enlargement debates notwithstanding, in the actual realm of international politics Russia's stark opposition to NATO's enlargement to include Ukraine and Georgia greatly influenced the development of the policy that currently guides NATO's engagement with the two countries: refusing to invite them as members and discursively insisting on their right to choose their own security arrangements while extending expansive political and practical support. The lack of consensus within the Alliance on granting membership to Ukraine and Georgia is a key factor that determines NATO's current policy. The lack of consensus is in itself influenced by the

fear that bringing the two countries in would mean an inevitable direct conflict with Russia, bearing consequences for the security of NATO states and their populations.

Russia's re-invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, preceded by Russia's publication of the so-called draft treaties<sup>12</sup> demanding, among others, the halt of NATO's enlargement to the post-Soviet republics, has brought NATO states in an indirect conflict with Russia as they supply Ukraine with weaponry to repel Russia's aggression. NATO has responded forcefully to Russia's aggression, drastically updating its defense posture.<sup>13</sup> Russia's aggression has resulted in membership applications from Finland and Sweden. At the Madrid Summit, NATO invited them to become members following the trilateral memorandum between Turkey, Sweden and Finland that removed Turkey's objections to veto their membership.<sup>14</sup> NATO has committed support for Moldova – another neutral state that could be facing Russia's aggression.<sup>15</sup>

These notwithstanding, the decisions taken at the 2022 Madrid Summit show that, despite Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, the Alliance still remains indecisive about granting Georgia and Ukraine membership or even the MAP. Everything-but-Membership, therefore, remains the guiding mantra of NATO's engagement with these countries in the years to come.

### **Madrid Summit and the New Strategic Concept: Implications for Georgia**

The Madrid Summit is indeed the new benchmark that will see the further expansion of cooperation between NATO and Georgia. Similar to NATO's change of policy following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO's decision to further forge partnerships is necessitated by Russia's re-invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

In the new Strategic Concept, NATO reaffirmed its Open-Door Policy referring to NATO's enlargement as "a historic success." The decision is politically important as Russia is denied the right to have a sphere of influence over the post-Soviet republics, something that it consistently asserts. In describing Russia, the Concept reads that "it seeks to establish spheres of influence and direct control through coercion, subversion, aggression and annexation."<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, the Concept acknowledges the security interdependence between NATO members and the aspirant states. It has committed to developing partnerships with the three aspirant states and reaffirmed the decision taken “at the 2008 Bucharest Summit and all subsequent decisions with respect to Georgia and Ukraine.”<sup>17</sup>

NATO’s Strategic Concept, together with Western Balkans, refers to the Black Sea region as “of strategic importance for the Alliance” and commits to support “the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of interested countries in these regions.”<sup>18</sup> This is of particular importance for Georgia which has been consistently asking for NATO’s increased role in the region.

At the Madrid Summit, NATO pledged renewed support for Georgia and other aspirant states “in light of the changed security environment in Europe.” The Allies decided to unveil “new measures to step up tailored political and practical support to partners, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova” and committed to work “to build their integrity and resilience, develop capabilities and uphold their political independence.”<sup>19</sup>

In sum, NATO’s Madrid Summit brings Georgia the new tools for integration with NATO but fails to deliver progress on the membership front. However unfortunate, this is the strategic environment in which Georgia needs to plan its responses to the national security challenges it faces and may face in the future.

### **Democracy, Interoperability with NATO and Resilience: Georgia’s Guide in a Turbulent Decade**

Georgia faces numerous conventional and non-conventional threats from Russia. Despite the absence of direct conflict between Russia and Georgia since 2008, the practices of borderization, that risks escalation, as well as Russia’s instrumentalization of separatist conflicts to affect Georgia’s strategic thinking remain cause for concern for Georgia. Direct Russian aggression cannot be fully ruled out – although admittedly, Russia could be struggling with waging wars on several fronts – given the increasing confrontation between Russia and the West that brings Georgia even closer to NATO and the EU’s geopolitical core. Georgia’s economic security is also not fully guaranteed as dependence on Russia grows<sup>20</sup> and Russia is suspected of using economic leverage to sow discord in the target states.



Cyber attacks and disinformation campaigns also form part and parcel of Russia's policies vis-à-vis Georgia.

To better navigate in a turbulent strategic environment and in addition to conducting forceful diplomacy to convince the Allied states of the benefits of Georgia's NATO membership, Georgia needs to base its policies on three major pillars: democracy consolidation, interoperability with NATO and resilience. These are the pillars that will be sine qua non of Georgia's admission to the Alliance whenever the strategic environment permits.

### ***Democracy Consolidation***

Russia's war against Ukraine brought Georgia the strategic opportunities that seemed rather unimaginable before. The European Union granted Georgia the European Perspective and sees it as future member of the EU together with Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkans. The decisions of NATO Madrid Summit, although short of Georgia's ultimate membership goal, is a moment for celebration as Georgia is becoming embedded in the Western geopolitical core. These are momentous developments and they cannot be realized if Georgia fails to commit to democratic consolidation and reforms. Although arguably strategic and geopolitical necessities could trump NATO's democratic conditionality, having consolidating democracy removes the hurdles that could otherwise be present in the accession process.

### ***Interoperability with NATO***

Interoperability with NATO forces is an integral part of the NATO integration process. Georgia has made significant progress in meeting NATO's standards, particularly through its participation in the NATO and the US-led international missions and through regular joint exercises with NATO member states. Georgia should continue its participation in NATO-led military exercises, including in the maritime exercises, particularly given that NATO has in its new Strategic Concept declared the Black Sea region as of strategic significance.

### ***Resilience***

Georgia should work towards building a more resilient state and society that is able to come together in the face of external challenges. Resilience is core to the operation of the Alliance and involves, among others, addressing strategic vulnerabilities and dependencies, ensuring civil preparedness and being able to quickly recover from strategic hurdles.<sup>21</sup>

To build a resilient state and society, Georgia should invest in protecting its critical infrastructure and addressing strategic dependencies on Russia. Further, it must bolster civil preparedness and commit to strengthening its economic security. Addressing domestic vulnerabilities is a necessary condition so that Georgia is able to realize its foreign policy objectives in the coming decade.

## **Conclusion**

NATO-Georgian relations have been progressing for over the decades. While the Bucharest Summit decision to promise Georgia membership still holds, the actual membership has not been achieved. This is based on NATO's Everything-but-Membership policy that has been developed in relation to Ukraine and Georgia.

The policy rests on the approach that envisages political and practical support to aspirant states with relevant instruments for those purposes – such as the NATO-Georgian Commission and the Substantial NATO-Georgia package (SNGP) – being in place and regularly updated. However, the lack of consensus within the Alliance stemming from the fear of direct conflict with Russia limits NATO from offering an immediate membership path for Georgia and Ukraine in particular.

The new Strategic Concept and the NATO Madrid Summit Declaration have indeed confirmed that this is how NATO is going to engage with the partner states in the coming decade. Georgia has to acknowledge the new strategic reality and, in addition to continuing to argue the case for its immediate membership, it should base its future NATO policy on three pillars of democracy consolidation, interoperability and resilience. These are sine qua non of Georgia's membership to NATO when the strategic environment so permits.

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