

10 years after Bucharest Why NATO should double-down on Georgian membership

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2018 is a momentous year for Georgia: it marks the 100th anniversary of the first Democratic Republic of Georgia. It is also the 10th anniversary of the war with Russia (August 2008) and of the Bucharest Summit, when Tbilisi was promised a seat at NATO's table.

A decade on, NATO-Georgia cooperation has substantially deepened. The country now meets NATO standards in many areas: it has modernised its armed forces and interoperability between Georgian troops and the armies of NATO countries has increased. Georgia has contributed more to international NATO missions than many existing members and also meets the Alliance's defence spending target. Tbilisi has also undertaken reforms to strengthen democracy, eradicate corruption and ensure civilian control of the military.

NATO has repeatedly reiterated its promise, but a long-coveted Membership Action Plan (MAP) remains elusive, despite Georgia being at least as prepared as Montenegro was when it joined the Alliance in 2017. Concerns over Moscow's possible reaction is the main reason for stalling. Russian military adventurism in Georgia and Ukraine heightened anxieties about further eastern enlargement.

Georgia has become an important ally for NATO. Its relationship with the Alliance far exceeds the MAP framework. While popular support for membership remains high at 65%,¹ it could wane, however, if Georgia remains indefinitely in NATO's waiting room. This risks giving weight to the Russian narrative that the West does not want Georgia and harming the reform momentum spurred by the prospect of Euro-Atlantic integration.

The 11-12 July 2018 NATO Brussels Summit is an opportunity for the Alliance. Given Georgia's commitment to transatlantic security, it is in NATO's

interest to strengthen ties with Tbilisi. As a reliable partner that shares common interests and values, the country offers the West a strategic foothold in the South Caucasus. The Alliance must reaffirm its membership commitment and reiterate that no third country has a veto on its enlargement. It should further deepen practical cooperation and bolster Georgia's ability to defend itself. Reaffirming NATO's support would reassure Georgian society, boost reform efforts and move the country ever closer to the Alliance.

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BACKGROUND – GEORGIA'S EURO-ATLANTIC CHOICE

In the aftermath of independence, Georgia joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council and Partnership for Peace. With a centuries-old European identity, Georgians view themselves as naturally belonging to the transatlantic family and see NATO membership as the only choice for ensuring national security.

Geographically located at a strategic crossroads, Georgia offered its territory for the transit of NATO forces to

¹ Results of March 2018 survey carried out for NDI by CRRG Georgia

Afghanistan after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Cooperation with the Euro-Atlantic community deepened after the 2003 Rose Revolution when young pro-western reformers came to power in Tbilisi. Today, Georgia is a crucial transit route for Caspian hydrocarbons heading to Europe. While challenges remain, including issues with the independence of the judiciary, the country has taken significant steps to boost democracy, liberalise the economy, and fight corruption.

With NATO promising eventual membership without a concrete timeframe, Moscow had every incentive to keep Georgia weak and unstable, so that it would never become eligible for membership. Four months later Russia invaded Georgia.

Viewing Georgia as a reliable ally and a beacon of democracy, former US President G. W. Bush strongly supported its NATO aspirations and called for Tbilisi to receive a MAP at the April 2008 Bucharest Summit. Some European partners, notably France and Germany, did not share his enthusiasm. While both argued that Georgia was not ready to receive a MAP, concern over Russia's reaction was pivotal. Moscow had voiced its firm opposition to further eastern enlargement. While the Summit Declaration did not offer a MAP, it promised NATO entry.

With NATO promising eventual membership without a concrete timeframe, Moscow had every incentive to keep Georgia weak and unstable, so that it would never become eligible for membership. Four months later Russia invaded Georgia. Russian soldiers came within a few kilometres of Tbilisi. While the war did not change Georgia's NATO aspirations, wariness within the Alliance increased. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine have further heightened concerns. The lack of meaningful reaction to Russia's aggression in Georgia bolstered its confidence in invading Ukraine.

While NATO has reiterated its commitment to Georgia in every subsequent summit declaration since 2008, Georgia has bent over backwards to demonstrate that it can be a net contributor to Euro-Atlantic security.

STATE OF PLAY – GOING ABOVE AND BEYOND

In addition to taking significant steps to meet NATO standards and improve its defence capabilities after the 2008 war, Georgia made a unilateral commitment to the non-use of force to resolve the protracted conflicts on its territory.

Georgia-NATO cooperation has significantly deepened through the NATO-Georgia Commission and the Annual National Programme (ANP), which sets the policy and reform priorities for Georgia's NATO membership.

The most significant boost in practical military cooperation followed Russia's annexation of Crimea. From a European security perspective, strengthening the resilience of neighbours to enable them to withstand coercion from Russia had become crucial.

At the 2014 Cardiff Summit, Tbilisi obtained the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP). It aims to strengthen Georgia's military capability including advancing its territorial defence capabilities and boosting security sector reform. High-level experts from 26 NATO countries have been training and advising Georgia's military and civilian institutions. Georgia has also become one of the Enhanced Opportunities Partners (EOP), which provides all of the privileges that Alliance members receive except for the collective security umbrella.

Georgia is a major contributor to NATO operations. Since 2012, it has been the largest per capita contributor to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Resolute Support Mission (RSM) in Afghanistan. The country is also the only non-NATO country to join NATO's rapid response team.

NATO's presence in Georgia further increased with the opening of the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Centre in 2015. Joint military exercises have had a reassuring effect on Georgian society.

Bilateral cooperation, particularly with Washington, has also increased. The Defence Readiness Programme aims to improve Georgia's territorial defence, while a 2016 Memorandum on Deepening the Defence and Security Partnership opened the way for military aid and sales of advanced arms. Georgia thus received 410 Javelin anti-tank missiles and 72 launch units in April 2018. The US Army will shortly open a Joint Multinational Readiness Centre, a training centre to prepare troops for land warfare. It will be only the second such post outside the US, after Germany.

Tbilisi has done everything NATO has asked for and more. Nevertheless, geography remains Georgia's Achilles heel. Ongoing resistance has nothing to do with the country's readiness for membership and everything to do with Russia's presumed reaction. This approach gives Moscow veto power over a sovereign country's decision and undermines the credibility of the "open door policy".

A selective open door policy?

While Montenegro's accession in 2017 is proof of NATO's "open door policy", it represents a double-edged sword for Georgia: it signals that the Alliance is open to further expansion, but it also shows bias as in some areas Montenegro was less prepared than Georgia, such as the fight against corruption.

Despite Russia's opposition, NATO moved ahead with Montenegro's membership. The integration of the Western Balkan states into NATO and the EU has long been seen as crucial in preventing war in the region and thus vital for European security.

Georgia's case is more complicated: not only does the country border Russia, but there are two protracted conflicts on its territory. As NATO's policy makes clear, however, the resolution of territorial disputes is a factor to be considered in evaluating a new member's suitability, not a precondition. Russia's occupation of the Tskhinvali Region and Abkhazia, where it maintains a significant military presence, gives the Kremlin a platform to create instability and block progress towards resolving the conflicts. Nevertheless, as recently proposed by Luke Coffey,² NATO could grant membership by temporarily excluding Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region from NATO's Article 5 security guarantee.

Creeping Annexation

Beginning with the August 2008 war, as Georgia has strengthened its defence capabilities, Russia has consolidated its military presence in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region, which Moscow recognises as independent states. Both regions have signed so-called security treaties with Russia, incorporating their troops into the Russian army. Furthermore, Russia continues to move the administrative lines between the occupied territories and Georgian controlled territory. This so-called "borderisation" process has resulted in Georgia losing more land while ordinary people often lose their homes. The killing of Georgian citizens, including Archil Tatumashvili, underlines the grave situation in the occupied territories.

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Russia has also failed to implement fully the 6-point ceasefire agreement negotiated in 2008. It prevents the EU Monitoring Mission from entering the occupied territories and blocks the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Russia's soft power onslaught in Georgia is also relentless. Even though public support for Euro-Atlantic integration currently remains high, hybrid warfare is used to undermine it, including exploiting Georgia's lack of a MAP.

PROSPECTS – A CHALLENGING ROAD AHEAD

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While NATO reiterates its commitment to membership, a broad consensus on this issue remains absent, however,

primarily due to concerns over Russia. It will be difficult for countries that support Georgian membership, such as the Baltic States and the Visegrad group, to convince those that remain sceptical. It also seems unlikely that the US can play a pivotal role. Despite the Trump Administration reaffirming its support for Georgia's aspirations, it is not a priority for the US President. Tensions between the US and European partners on several issues, including trade, further complicate the situation.

Relations with Russia also seem bound to remain adversarial. In this context, NATO has reinforced its forward deterrence on its Eastern flank, including the Baltic states that feel threatened after Russia's aggression in Ukraine. It should not rule out further enlargement, however. In reality, Russia is unlikely to declare war against a NATO member. Instead, it will step up efforts to destabilise these countries through cyber-warfare and low-level subversion.

Doubling down on Georgia

Russia's aggressive revisionism in the Black Sea region and its power projection in the Middle East have increased the strategic significance of the Black Sea region. Given Georgia's pro-Western policies and commitment to transatlantic security, NATO should double down on Georgia, boosting support to further sharpen resilience and territorial defence. The Brussels Summit is an opportunity to send a positive message.

As a first step, the meetings of the NATO-Georgia Commission, currently held at ministerial level during summits, should be upgraded to Heads of State level as is the case for Ukraine. The Summit Declaration should:

- ▶ assert the alliance's firm recognition of Georgia's progress in the context of NATO's open door policy;
- ▶ reaffirm Georgia's territorial integrity;
- ▶ reiterate that Russia's ongoing occupation of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region is unacceptable;
- ▶ call on Moscow to meet the entirety of its obligations under the 2008 ceasefire agreement; and
- ▶ underline that NATO does not accept spheres of influence and Russian efforts to draw a new red line through Europe.

It is also essential to propose new areas for practical cooperation, notably in:

- ▶ **The Black Sea:** With Russia's military presence in the Black Sea increasing, the Warsaw Summit Declaration underlined the strategic importance of the region and its security. Allies agreed on developing a Tailored Forward Presence along with the establishment of a Multinational Framework Brigade in Romania. While this was an essential first step, NATO should elaborate an ambitious vision for the Black Sea, which should involve not only regional NATO allies but

² Luke Coffey, NATO Membership for Georgia: In US and European Interest, The Heritage Foundation, 2018.

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also cooperation with NATO-aspirants. NATO should include Georgia in any new initiative, including Black Sea air patrolling (similar to the Baltic Air Police Mission) that could be initiated by Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania. Since Georgia actively participates in EU CSDP missions, new EU-NATO initiatives related to the Black Sea could also include Georgia.

- **Countering hybrid threats:** While strategic communication is part of the SNGP, efforts to counter social media propaganda and disinformation campaigns should be scaled up. Strengthening cybersecurity cooperation is also crucial. A meaningful step would be to establish in Georgia a 'Black Sea NATO Centre of Excellence' focused on improving cybersecurity resilience both in Georgia and the rest of the region.
- **Boosting defence capacity:** NATO should further expand Georgia's territorial defence capabilities by enhancing troop operability, aiding the acquisition of modern military equipment, and increasing joint military exercises. The concept of 'more NATO in Georgia and more Georgia in NATO' should continue to be the cornerstone of the partnership. This could entail supplying anti-aircraft and air defence weapons and building up Georgia's maritime capabilities.
- **The Enhanced Forward Presence:** Given Georgia's excellent track record in serving alongside NATO troops in Afghanistan and elsewhere, Georgia should be invited to join the multinational battalion based in Poland.

Given that Georgia has already met all the requirements, NATO should dispense with the MAP process. MAP has become politicised to the point where it is undermining domestic support for Euro-Atlantic integration. The SGNP and ANP are a roadmap for meeting NATO standards and preparing for membership and should be recognised as the primary tools for Georgian accession.

There are also steps that the Georgian government should take.

- First, Georgia should continue to implement the SNGP and the ANP. Intensifying internal security coordination is crucial. Boosting its ability to coordinate strategic communication and counter hybrid threats should also become a priority.
- Second, Georgia should intensify cooperation with European NATO members, not least Germany and France, to enhance its image as a reliable partner and thus boost support for its membership.
- Third, efforts to engage with the populations of the Tskhinvali Region and Abkhazia should continue. In April 2018, the government presented a peace initiative – 'A Step to a Better Future' – aimed to facilitate trade, provide educational opportunities and give access to the benefits of European integration. While the separatist governments rejected the initiative, Georgia's willingness to build bridges is a positive step and Tbilisi should persevere in that direction.

Georgia will need patience

Divisions within NATO, the lack of a robust strategy towards Russia, and growing transatlantic tensions mean membership is not around the corner. Georgia will have to show strategic patience and perseverance. Tbilisi should use to the maximum all the tools that NATO has put on the table and continue to push for more. Relations will continue to deepen further transforming the country's military and bolstering Georgia's resilience. Hence, Georgia will incrementally become part of NATO.

However, NATO should understand that its current policy of keeping Georgia in an ambiguous limbo undermines the alliance's credibility and reinforces the Russian narrative that the West does not want Georgia, thus advancing Moscow's goals of discrediting liberal Euro-Atlantic values and establishing special zones of influence.

This equivocal situation only encourages Russia to defy further the West, which in turn spurs instability. It also undermines the commitment made by NATO after the Cold War, that the nations formerly within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence could feel confident that they would be safe from renewed Russian aggression. In September 2017, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg reiterated that the alliance is committed to the goal of membership. It is time for NATO to prove that this is more than an empty statement.