

## Georgian Foreign Policy: Holding the Line amid Uncertainty

By George Khelashvili, Tbilisi

### Abstract

Georgia's foreign policy in the last few years has been an oddity in the post-Soviet space. With no solid security guarantees, domestic or international, Georgia tried to defy Russian influence and try to integrate into the transatlantic political structures. Unsurprisingly, this ambitious project is under serious threat of failure, due to international systemic and domestic political reasons. Georgia is likely to continue to rely on Western political and economic assistance in its efforts to hold the line amid uncertainty.

### Georgia's Foreign Policy Predicament

Close to the end of President Saakashvili's second term in office, Georgia finds itself in a difficult political situation, as its national security remains fragile, its territorial integrity unravels, and its domestic political stability remains in doubt. Georgia has failed to join any significant political, security or economic regional cooperation organisation, or form a meaningful strategic alliance. Georgia's democratic image, which distinguishes it from its neighbors, is tarnished, and the country failed to make a decisive breakthrough either in terms of economic sustainability or social development.

Yet, Georgia manages to stay its course toward the rapprochement with the West and finds certain sympathies in the capitals of the leading European countries and the United States. This gives hope to the mainstream Georgian political establishment, both the Government as well as the opposition, that Georgia's perseverance in its efforts to become part of the Western world will bear fruit one day.

### Georgian Foreign Policy: A Basic Conceptual Framework

Successive Georgian governments since independence considered Georgia a pivotal state in the region, and perceived international politics in terms of continued epic struggle between the United States and Russia, in which the West would eventually triumph. Therefore, Georgia's political line was to assist the West in its struggle against Russia. Even the war of 2008, in which Georgia was left to its own devices in the face of Russian military intervention, did not shatter this dualistic and simplified image of world politics.

Georgia's most recent presidents, Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikheil Saakashvili, drew slightly different policy prescriptions from the above mentioned political worldview. In terms of continuity and change, there were two major differences that distinguished Saakashvili's foreign policy from his predecessor. First, while Shevardnadze tried to 'hide' the Georgian question from the confrontational agenda of the American–Russian relationship, Saakashvili tried to emphasise the differ-

ences between the two larger powers and Georgia's role as an irritant in this relationship.

The second novel trait of Saakashvili's presidency has been too much reliance on political rhetoric and the belief in the overwhelming importance of ideas in world politics. One aspect of this belief was the idea that an ideological appeal could fill the gap created by the absence of the West's tangible 'material' interests in Georgia, either in the security or economic fields.

The George W. Bush Administration offered strong rhetorical support for democracy promotion in the post-Soviet space and the Middle East in the second half of the 2000s. This seemed to vindicate the Georgian Government's view of the importance of its ideological take on foreign policy. The first three years of the Barack Obama Administration left the Georgian Government out in the cold in its aspirations to obtain support and encouragement from the West in its showdown with Russia, still dominated by Saakashvili's arch-enemy Vladimir Putin.

The line that the Georgian Government chose since the August 2008 war was to heavily rely on the apparent strategic partnership between Georgia and the United States, while defying Russia. This policy has been based on little strategic rationale or political calculation, but simply represented an attempt to maintain the line in circumstances of strategic uncertainty. Georgia's gamble partly paid off due to the inertia of American and European support and some remnants of credibility as of a relatively democratic state in the surrounding area.

The December 2011 National Security Concept reiterates all of the above perceptions of the current Georgian Government. It designates Russia as a major threat to Georgia's independence and sovereignty, and counts on Western political and security assistance in coping with Moscow. The basis for expecting such forthcoming support are Georgia's alleged democratic achievements and liberal reforms of the last few years.

### Integration into the North-Atlantic Structures

The main vision of Georgia's national security—integration into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

(NATO) –virtually vanished from mainstream Georgian foreign policy. Despite the explicit promise of NATO membership, given in April 2008 by the Alliance, Georgia is not likely to get any tangible results from NATO in the foreseeable future. The Georgian Government has recently downgraded its expectations with respect to the NATO Chicago Summit, realising that NATO will only reiterate its promise of membership at best.

There is more progress in another direction of Georgia's 'pro-Western' foreign policy. The Georgian Government started negotiations with the European Union over an agreement on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) in December 2011, following Georgia's consent to allow Russia into the World Trade Organisation. The agreement requires Georgia to allow more regulation, curb monopolisation and conduct meaningful institutional reforms. These negotiations would lead toward more transparency in Georgia's economy, fewer technical barriers to trade, and most importantly, proper protection of intellectual property rights.

After a virtual embargo imposed by Russia against Georgia since 2006, the share of the EU's trade with Georgia has risen significantly. Therefore, Georgia is interested in augmenting trade with Europe, but the terms of the DCFTA agreement are difficult to fulfil for Tbilisi. Much of Georgia's economy lacks transparency. Therefore, adaptation to the European trade area may be problematic, even if highly desirable. President Saakashvili hopes to implement the agreement during 2013. Given the previous history of Georgia–EU negotiations on the subject, as well as the poor condition of Georgia's economy, such estimates seem overly optimistic.

### Relations with the United States

Georgia's foreign policy is strongly driven by perceptions of American attitudes toward Georgia. President Saakashvili has tried hard to restore American–Georgian relations to the same level of political intimacy that they enjoyed under Bush. Despite these efforts, it took President Obama three years to invite Saakashvili for a meeting in the Oval Office. Saakashvili claimed to have scored a major victory with this meeting, securing America's massive defence aid to Georgia and the opening of Free Trade Agreement negotiations with Washington. These claims may be significantly exaggerated.

The promise of American aid in Georgia's 'self-defence,' as Georgian officials put it, may be related to Washington's readiness to continue helping Georgia in building institutional capacity at the Ministry of Defence. It is also plausible that the Americans will provide help in training higher ranking Georgian officers than was the case before. These plans cannot be

estimated as a breakthrough in American–Georgian security relations. It is highly unlikely that the United States will provide Georgia with armaments or ammunition. This is especially doubtful as President Obama rejected the section of a congressional bill that required the president to extend military assistance to Georgia. Obama's interest in meeting Saakashvili was in silencing his domestic critics, who had alleged that the current administration 'sold out' Georgia for the sake of its reset with Russia.

### A New Gambit with Putin's Russia and Relations with Neighbors

Oddly, among all directions of Georgia's foreign political activity, relations with Russia show an apparent promise of improvement. Last November, Georgia gave the green light to Russia's long-awaited membership in the World Trade Organisation. This happened against the background of foreign pressure on Tbilisi from the United States and the European Union. In exchange, Georgia received better prospects for free trade relations with both Americans and Europeans. According to the Georgian–Russian deal, both Russians and Georgians gained access to monitoring cross-border activities on all borders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, via a third party, a Swiss private monitoring company.

Moreover, air traffic between Georgia and Russia was restored last year after more than five years without direct flight connection. Also, in late February 2012, Georgia unilaterally waived visa requirements for Russian citizens entering Georgia. Such a waiver had only existed for the inhabitants of Russia's North Caucasian republics, much to the annoyance of Moscow. In fact, since last year, the Georgian Government largely silenced its negative rhetoric about Russian handling of the North Caucasus. Georgia's government-controlled media still vehemently denounces Russia and its leaders but Tbilisi offers much less criticism toward Moscow on the international arena.

It would be premature to expect any breakthrough in Georgian–Russian relations in the foreseeable future. Georgia's concessions toward Russian membership in the WTO were largely involuntary and externally imposed on Tbilisi. There is no progress in the question of Georgia's secessionist regions—Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The so-called Geneva talks, the trilateral negotiations over these questions between Georgians, Russians and the secessionists, are at a virtual impasse.

The Georgian government does not shy away from looking for opportunities for the diversification of its foreign alignments, including somewhat awkward moves to improve relations with Iran. Relations with traditional political and economic partners—Turkey and Azerbai-

jan—remain solid even if somewhat stalled in development. Despite the new opening toward the EU, relations with the leading European powers—France and Germany—remain shallow. This is largely due to Saakashvili's discontent with the French and German take on Russian–Georgian relations. While relations with the formerly communist states of 'New Europe' remain rhetorically robust, these states have little to offer Georgia either in terms of security or economic cooperation.

### Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy

The major issues affecting Georgia's foreign policy are not so much external as internal. The dramatic rise in revenues since 2004 and the virtual absence of checks and balances on President Saakashvili's power allowed the Georgian Government to conduct its foreign policy with few restrictions imposed by domestic politics. This freedom was enhanced by the existence of a virtual national consensus over foreign policy, defined in terms of integration with Atlantic structures—NATO and the EU.

More recently, however, almost all these prerequisites for giving Saakashvili unrestricted control over foreign policy-making by Saakashvili are weakening. Georgia's mounting foreign debt, the decline in foreign direct investments, and the relative stagnation of economic growth have restricted the Government's ability to neglect restrictions imposed by the Russian embargo on Georgian exports. Moreover, Saakashvili's sway over power in Georgia is challenged by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili who has created his own political force to contest the 2012 Parliamentary elections, promising

to oust Saakashvili's United National Movement from power. While Georgians are still well-disposed toward the idea of integration in NATO and the EU, some political forces have called for reconciliation with Russia.

The current Government's political pact with the population was predicated on the provision of effective governance in exchange for loyalty to Saakashvili's rule. This pact also included a consensus regarding foreign policy. This deal is likely to persist as long as the Government remains effective in providing public services and relative economic welfare. The other two major pillars of Saakashvili's legitimacy—his promise to restore Georgia's territorial integrity and democratisation—have already become obsolete. It remains to be seen whether the only remaining basis of the government-population pact remains effective.

### Conclusion

Georgian foreign policy is based on President Saakashvili's grip on power and is rooted in the historical narrative of Georgia's belonging to the European civilisation as opposed to the Russian socio-cultural space. Even if Saakashvili loses power eventually, it is unlikely that Georgia will permanently denounce its ambition to follow the path of Central European nations toward joining the European Union. Meanwhile, the Russian factor may be a permanent fixture in Georgia's domestic and foreign policy. However, because of this very Russian factor, Georgia may still get some political assistance from the West. This assistance remains the only tangible basis for the vitality of Georgia's current foreign policy.

#### *About the Author*

George Khelashvili is an assistant professor of International Relations and Graduate Studies Director at the Centre for Social Sciences at Tbilisi State University, Georgia. He recently finished his doctoral thesis at Oxford on US policy toward Georgia between 1991 and 2008. His research interests include foreign policy, post-Soviet politics, and the role of ideas in international relations.

#### *Further Reading:*

- *National Security Concept of Georgia* (December 2011), accessed at: <http://www.nsc.gov.ge/files/files/National%20Security%20Concept.pdf>
- Khelashvili, G., 'Georgia's Foreign Policy Impasse: Is Consensus Crumbling?' *Ponars Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 187 (September 2011).
- MacFarlane, S. N., 'Post-Revolutionary Georgia on the Edge?' *Chatham House Briefing Paper* (March 2011).
- Welt, C., 'Don't Shy Away From Progress on the Russia–Georgia Conflict: New Agreement Between Countries on Russia's WTO Membership Indicates Progress,' *Center for American Progress* (6 February, 2012).