

Analysis

NATO Lacks the Stomach for South Caucasus Fight

By Ahto Lobjakas, Brussels

Abstract

If there was a window of opportunity for NATO to establish an entrenched presence in the South Caucasus, it opened in 2004 and closed in early 2008. Neither the Europeans nor the Americans under President Obama are interested in pushing for Georgia's membership now. The prospect of Georgian membership seems to hold little benefit for Georgia itself, the NATO alliance, or pan-European security.

Early Interest in the South Caucasus

NATO underwent its second round of post-Cold-War expansion in 2003. In parallel and perhaps more importantly, the European Union completed a momentous transformation in 2004 when it took in eight former Soviet republics and satellites. Both enlargements rode a wave of unprecedented public and political goodwill in Western Europe towards the eastern reaches of the continent. Historical justice was seen as being reestablished and for a (relatively) brief moment the momentum of enlargement seemed unstoppable and irreversible.

NATO subscribed to what most allies believed was genuinely an "open door policy." Romano Prodi, the president of the European Commission, told visiting Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma in 2004 "the door [to the EU was] not closed." It bears noting the "Orange Revolution" had yet to take place.

Georgia's "Rose Revolution" had taken place earlier, in November 2003, but the region's geographical location made the case for its Euroatlantic integration harder to lay out. There were doubts in the EU in 2002–2003 whether to include it in the European Neighborhood Policy initiative (originally called "Wider Europe").

By 2004, there were clear signs of a sea change in the EU/NATO and South Caucasus relations, too. A first-ever visit by a NATO Secretary General to the South Caucasus took place in November 2004, when Jaap de Hoop Scheffer toured all three capitals. Shortly beforehand, he had created the post of an alliance Special Representative for the South Caucasus and Central Asia, occupied since by Robert Simmons.

Earlier that year, de Hoop Scheffer said in an interview with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty that a NATO peace-keeping force in Nagorno Karabakh was "a distant prospect" – but significantly not something to be rejected out of hand. He remained cautious about the prospects of any of the three countries to join NATO, however, saying there were "all kinds of roads" leading to Euroatlantic integration.

The EU, for its part, was noticeably keen to get involved in the region. Prodi said in May 2004 there was an "urgency" felt in the bloc about resolving the Nagorno Karabakh conflict and went as far as to suggest Brussels was keen to "contribute to the solution" – although noting the EU had not been asked to become directly involved in the OSCE-sponsored Minsk process, chaired by the United States, Russia and France.

The EU's enthusiasm for the South Caucasus at the time was partly propelled by calculations revolving around energy security, but partly also by a feeling of a geopolitical "high" produced by riding the crest of the enlargement wave. The bloc was keen to explore the extent of its ambition and powers. This, it must be remembered, was before the EU's effort to consolidate its constitutional footing foundered in 2005, resulting in a protracted period of critical introspection.

A European Change of Heart

The rejection of the EU's constitutional treaty by France in June 2005 (followed by that of the Netherlands a few months later) was a key turning point because NATO's outreach towards the east has always of necessity "piggy-backed" on that of the EU. The difference between the two organizations is, of course, overwhelmingly determined by the presence/absence of the United States.

France, Germany and Italy – all EU member states and NATO allies at once – were already skeptical around the time of both organizations' expansion of pushing the limits of Euroatlantic integration any farther east. But they submitted, by and large, to the zeitgeist until about 2005, when the "European" and "American" narratives began to seriously diverge.

The US Remains Committed

The United States continued to push strongly for further EU enlargement, notably raising hackles with its attempts to get the EU to take Turkey on board. In the background, Washington also discreetly cultivated ties with the South Caucasus governments, informally

lobbying them to declare an interest in joining NATO. Armenia, the most dependent among the three on Russian backing, largely owing to the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, refused outright. Yerevan's line from early on has been to pursue a "multi-vectoral" foreign policy, a euphemism in many Soviet successor states for a foreign policy designed to offend no one, least of all Russia.

Azerbaijan wavered, but never definitively declared its hand. Baku did respond to overtures the United States made on behalf of the EU – for its own reasons – to secure Azerbaijan's participation in the Nabucco project. But a clear political commitment to NATO never materialized, owing to a complex mixture of internal domestic considerations and a fear of Russian reprisals (among other things, Azerbaijan has a major vulnerability in the shape of its millions of immigrant workers in Russia).

Georgia, of course, was a different story. President Mikheil Saakashvili quickly aligned his country with Viktor Yushchenko's Ukraine and declared an interest in both EU and NATO membership. While the EU's interest cooled from 2005 onwards, mostly as a result of increasingly determined French and German opposition, NATO, egged on by the United States, continued to forge closer links with Tbilisi in particular.

April 2008 Turning Point

Matters came to a head in April 2008 at NATO's Bucharest summit, where Berlin and Paris forced Washington to back down. There was to be no Membership Action Plan for Georgia (or Ukraine). What followed has been a story of increasingly ritual rhetorical engagement. The Russian–Georgian war in August 2008 produced a short-lived resurgence of Georgian hopes, but these were scotched equally effectively by Germany and France as by the new administration of President Barack Obama.

Berlin and Paris had very reluctantly gone along with the decision to suspend meetings of the NATO–Russia Council, effectively terminating diplomatic contacts, in August 2008 (Germany's ambassador to NATO went so far as to call the decision "stupid" last autumn). But it was Washington, who forced NATO to perform its embarrassing U-turn in March 2009 and literally eat the high-minded words of August 2008 about the principles and values guiding NATO–Russia cooperation. There was no mention in March of the aid NATO promised Georgia to rebuild its damaged civilian infrastructure (although NATO countries did field teams and are supplying some assistance), let alone any reference to military aid.

Obama reversed U.S. policy in the hope of engaging Moscow on nuclear disarmament – a higher good in the eyes of Washington. His administration (though

not Obama personally) has reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to see Georgia and Ukraine in NATO.

Russia Resurgent

The obverse of this story is Russia's growing confidence and determination to assert itself. The Georgian war, far from being a paradigm change, was a product of forces at work at least since 1999, the time of the second Chechen war, whose main goal is to consolidate central power and "roll back" what is seen as the encroachment of NATO and the EU. NATO expansion is the more bitterly resented development in Moscow, but the EU has also come to be seen as a threat. In April 2009, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused the EU of trying to subvert the sovereignty of Belarus and others neighbors by means of its Eastern Partnership initiative, which he described as a "sphere of influence."

The most telling failure of NATO's Eastern European allies has been their inability to force energy security onto the alliance's agenda in a meaningful manner. This has removed the most obvious pretext for the alliance to display an interest in the South Caucasus region given its crucial gas and oil transit role for Europe.

As briefly indicated above, Russia's rise has coincided with an emasculation of the EU's sense of purpose since 2005. This lack of direction has been accompanied by a keenly felt vulnerability to Russian energy supplies, driven home in what are now almost yearly mid-winter interruptions in deliveries. Curiously, the EU's internal woes have not prevented it (or more precisely, the larger continental member states) from seeking to establish a stronger (moral) presence in the global arena. The EU's calls for more "multilateralism" inevitably dictate an alliance of sorts with Russia, another would be global power, seeking to undermine "unilateral" U.S. hegemony.

Given this backdrop, the EU's and NATO's continental Western European member states have little desire or incentive to actively antagonize Russia in the South Caucasus or elsewhere. The situation is further compounded by the perception that Eastern European newcomers in NATO and the EU function as a U.S. "Trojan horse," as well as displaying a distinct preference for "Anglo-Saxon" political and economic models – all of which does nothing to endear their motives and interests to their Western European partners.

Looking to the Future

The status quo, now very firmly entrenched given the recent U.S. change of tack, was encapsulated with admirable clarity by Germany's Foreign Minister

Frank-Walter Steinmeier in an article in *Der Spiegel* where he said 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 (and Ukraine) now appear to fail on all counts.

Most paradoxically, the prospect of NATO membership has indeed had little obvious beneficial effect on either Georgia or Ukraine. In Georgia, Saakashvili resorted to violence and manipulations of the electoral timetable well in advance of the disappointment of Bucharest, and the invasion of South Ossetia (and the resultant loss of that province and Abkhazia) was something that no NATO government would have counseled; whereas Ukraine’s political structure has become virtually paralyzed over the past few years.

It is, of course, arguable, that much of this can be ascribed to Russia’s spoiling tactics, whether active or passive. Fomenting instability, it has turned out, is all it takes to frustrate “Euroatlantic integration.” It is an ingeniously simple tactic whose effects are not limited only to its objects like Georgia or Ukraine. The tactic also cruelly exposes the internal conceptual limitations of the policies of “passive aggression” and “voluntary imperialism” pursued by the EU and (to a less obvious extent) NATO.

NATO is at heart a collective defense alliance. Beyond that mission, everything else is determined by the balance of the interests of the allies. NATO went to, and remains in, Afghanistan, because its member states thought, and think, their vital interests were at stake (some more ingenuously than others, though). Russia’s invasion of Georgia was certainly seen as a challenge to “Euroatlantic security,” but on balance one that did not justify intervention.

“What can NATO do?” a hapless Jaap de Hoop Scheffer could only wring his hands at a NATO summit youth forum on April 2. “NATO will not march in with military force. That’s what NATO cannot do and that’s what NATO will not do. What NATO can do is talk to the Russians.”

What next? Georgia is back to square one and has everything to prove, once again, and against much longer odds this time. And it may not have the time. The Russian analyst Pavel Felgenhauer, for example, argues another Russo–Georgian war is inevitable – not only to finish the business of 2008, but because Moscow has a strategic need to create a land bridge to its bases in Armenia it simply cannot afford to disregard.

Armenia and Azerbaijan, for their part, are forced into an increasingly complex game of balances and counterbalances involving a visibly more active Turkey. But in the long run, Turkey will not be enough and the U.S. stance will decide. Under current circumstances it seems likely neither Baku nor Yerevan can afford anything more than the skeletal Partnership for Peace ties they already have with NATO, limited to officer exchanges and a few ministerial lunches a year. Russia is bound to block any other NATO involvement in the region, which means, among other things, that the erstwhile talk (as theoretical as it was) of a possible NATO peacekeeping role in the Caucasus is a distant memory.

Georgia will, for the foreseeable future, retain its Individual Partnership Action Plan, but any efforts to upgrade that into a MAP or rebuild its armed forces will be met with vicious Russian countermoves. It is unrealistic to expect that a NATO unwilling to draw up contingency defense plans for the Baltic countries would have the stomach to face down Russia in the Caucasus.

About the author

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Further reading

- “A Conversation with Russia”, full transcript of conversation with Russian Foreign Sergei Lavrov at Brussels Forum http://www.gmfus.org/brusselsforum/2009/docs/BFDay2_ConversationRussia.doc
- Frank-Walter Steinmeier, “We Face New Threats and Challenges”, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/0,1518,616969,00.html>