

Georgia's Path Westward Under the Three Powers

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Abstract

Present article overviews the history of modernization of Georgia after the collapse of the Soviet Union and its path to the West, as it was the issue, the country needed the most in post-Soviet era.

In this article, I briefed the progress, reached in the history of the country and the meaningful steps taken towards the West under three powers and tried to highlight the meaning of upgrading the army and capacity building as a result of strategic cooperation of US-Georgia in security realm.

Keywords: Defense, drills, security, strategic partnership, western path.

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Introduction

The USA and Georgia count their three decades of cooperation already. The partnership of these two countries started in the mid-1990s during the presidency of Eduard Shevardnadze. The pro-western ambitions of the country significantly increased since Rose Revolution in 2003, which brought Mikheil Saakashvili to the head of the power. This period is marked with intensifying the relationship of Georgia with the USA as, if the pro-Western foreign policy of Georgia during Shevardnadze's presidency was considered as full of zig-zag, Rose Revolution government started to pursue an assertive foreign policy to bring the country closer to Euro-Atlantic pace.

Security realm was of a critical importance for the post-Soviet, weak country with fragile statehood and weak internal policy. Being an ally of the US gave Georgia the opportunity to take western path and become a modern country. US led exercises and drills, provided within this cooperation made a huge influence on upgrading the army, which became one of the main contributors to NATO leading international security missions and enjoying with huge support from NATO allies as well.

This article compares the reforms, adopted under three powers: Union of Citizens of Georgia, National Movement and Georgian Dream and highlights the aim and impact of joint exercises on upgrading the Georgian Armed Forces.

Post-Soviet Georgia

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and declaring independence serves as the benchmarks of further transformation of Georgia and the history of the country to the western path. Like the majority of the post-Soviet states, Georgia was a weak power, and the beginning of Georgian sovereign existence of which can be portrayed as disastrous. Civil war, instability and collapse of statehood complicated an uneasy independence in 1992. The fragile statehood and weak internal policy were the biggest obstruction to

Georgia's prospect to become a modern, western-type state. The society lacked democratic traditions and civil elements within the political cultures. The country had to devise its own strategic culture to support the formation of an independent foreign policy. As a small state, unable to defend its national interests by its own political and military means, Georgia was considered as a weak power.

Dissolution of the Soviet Union was followed by a series of interconnected political, economic, military, ethnic challenges. Russia was the greatest of these challenges, which tried to maintain its status of "great power," which considers Georgia as a key state for its security interests in the region (Rondeli, Georgia: an emerging small sovereign nation).

After declaring its independence, Georgia is considered as one of the countries, aspiring to be independent among the Soviet-Union's successor states. As the country declared, its strategic goal was to join NATO and the European Union. A Pro-Western concept first appeared in Georgian political discourse towards the end of the Soviet era and was closely related to country's aspiration to quit USSR and regain independence. Its growing aspiration to the West and the transatlantic community deteriorated its relations with Russia (Falkowski, 2016).

Georgia and the United States can now look back at thirty years of shared relations. Although a meaningful development process was observed during this period and the political actors have changed on both sides, echoes of previous periods are seen in present relationship, whether through continuity, evolution or explicit distancing. An overview can tell us much about the state of the relationship today (Smolnik, 2020).

Defence and security is one of the main four areas of US-Georgian strategic partnership. In this article I will overview cooperation of these two countries in this realm, including military training and exercises which play a crucial role in upgrading Georgian army.

Start of the Strategic Partnership

Under the President Eduard Shevardnadze, who ruled the country from 1992 to 2003, Georgia was on the verge of turning to the West and the United States, in particular. The first attempts at bringing Georgia close to West were made during his administration, which was the most responsive to limitations and opportunities, that emerged in the security environment of Georgia, as during this period, Georgia was very vulnerable at national and international levels. Weak state institutions, difficult socio-economic condition, civil war, inexperienced political elites and resurgent Russia defined the political reality of Georgia. This reality started to change since the middle of 1990s, when the West started to pay attention to the South Caucasian region. Shevardnadze relied on the West and started to push forward to expand cooperation in the realm of politics and in the end of 1990, he openly expressed his desire to join NATO (Zedania, 2018).

Official announcement of President Shevardnadze in 2002 at NATO Prague Summit, that Georgia was seeking the NATO membership was a clear sign of the country's aspiration to align with the West. Shevardnadze's era is considered as the starting point of launching the security cooperation between Georgia and the United States under Georgia Train and Equip Program and involvement of Georgian from 2003 through 2008 in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The Georgia Train and Equip Program started in 2002 and involved the US and Georgian Armed Forces. The program aimed at training and equipping Georgian battalions with small unit tactics to fight against terrorism i.e. to build the capacity of the country to respond to domestic problems and the volatile Pankisi Gorge region, which was pretty difficult to control and enabled the terrorists and criminal groups to exploit the area. As part of US counterterrorism policies across the world, Georgia received aid from the United States to oppose domestic terrorism threats in Pankisi Gorge (Bushyhead, 2022).

The program implemented the decision of the President Bush to respond the request of the Government of Georgia for aid to enhance the counter-terrorism capabilities and address the situation in the Pankisi Gorge (State, 2003). Besides, the GTEP was a continuation of the other assistance, provided to Georgia "This builds on earlier military cooperation, especially support for border guards, to control the border between Georgia and Chechnya" (Pike, n.d.). In the fall of 2002, US trained troops backed the Georgia law enforcement agencies and started an overarching security cooperation to rid the Pankisi Gorge of terrorists and criminals. Nevertheless, Russia was skeptical of that, and believed Georgian Armed Forces would fail in combating terrorism without their involvement. Georgian officials stated, that since the security operation, security and stability have significantly improved. This success, among others, proved positive contribution to modernization of the Georgian AF and the country, in general, and the program is considered as one of the pieces of contribution to the Westernization of the Georgian Armed Forces and the first step, taken to NATO military standards (Bushyhead, 2022).

Pro-Western Course of Georgia Following the Rose Revolution under Saakashvili Presidency

Until the Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia was considered a failed and corrupted state, whose government was unable to perform its basic duties or control its territories and faced permanent challenges of unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The circumstance changed drastically, after Saakashvili took office. In this period, Georgia implemented the most effective and courageous reforms in the entire post-Soviet area through huge financial, political and expert backing from the West, namely the United States, which became a patron of Saakashvili reforms and efficient cooperation of Georgia and the USA (Falkowski, 2016). Saakashvili

decided to build his reforms on the three core pillars: reconstruction of state institutions, including the military forces, improvement of economic realm and international image of the country (Falkowski, 2016).

The “West” was considered as the stabilizer for democracy and the Western values in the Post-Soviet space, that was the reason, Saakashvili presented Georgia to the West. Under the Presidency of George Bush, a so called “Freedom Agenda” played a central part in US foreign policy along with support for democratic movements and democratization processes, which were considered as a means of combating terrorism. Following US support in GTEP, Georgia joined the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan (Smolnik, 2020).

Unlike Shevardnadze’s pragmatic policy, under which the country sought integration with the West due to financial reasons as well as balancing the influence of Russia and Turkey in the Caucasus, Saakashvili’s government much more focused on pro-Western foreign policy to modernize the country. As the chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on European Integration stated, following the Rose Revolution, the government seriously thought of reasons of needing the foreign policy, as if they aimed to build a modern state and the society, the country needed strategic partners to help with this. This was the core objective of the foreign policy. Besides, the country would have to distance from Russia as being with Russia, meant, that no modernization will take place in Georgia (Gvalia, 2013).

In the post Rose Revolution period, fundamental reforms were implemented in the security sector of Georgia, which became one of the main goals of Saakashvili regime and in the aftermath of the implemented reforms and changes in the security sector, the country acquired a qualitatively Western type security system, instead of a post-Russian one. The reforms, introduced in the defense realm included the changes, made in the structure of the Ministry of Defence in accordance with the NATO standards and

requirements, which implied splitting the Minister and Joint Staff.

The August war 2008 changed the security environment not only countrywide, but across the region as a whole. Considering the National Security Concept of Georgia, which defines national interests, values and develops main directions of the security policy and stresses, that occupation of its territories and the threat of new aggression from the Russia was the main threat, the country faced, the defence and security reforms were specified as the top priorities of Georgia (Labarre & Niculescu, 2017).

The list of the core documents, dedicated to security, adopted following Rose Revolution in 2003 is not limited by the concept. Extended communication with the NATO and the EU bodies contributed to the progress in this realm, that were needed for implementing the reforms in the security sector. The strategic documents, developed jointly with the representatives of the foregoing institutions, determined the nature of this communication. NATO’s individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), which prioritized the issue of reforms in defense system and the EU’s European Neighborhood policy Action Plan (ENP AP) were adopted in 2004 and 2006 respectively. They have been regularly updated and reflected the ongoing reforms and the specific strategies, that took place in various sectors with the help of Western experts.

Among the core documents, adopted during Saakashvili presidency, the Strategic Defense Review will be given particular attention, the adoption of which was one of the country’s commitments under the NATO IPAP. The document summarizes the strategic documents of the defense realm, developed by the government (the Threat Assessment Document, the National Military Strategy and the annual Minister’s Vision) and the appropriate laws. Based on this, the review describes the current situation in the armed forces and the plans for future development. According to the introduction of the document, applying a capability-based approach is consistent with NATO

defense planning practices and improves the ability of the country to adopt its structure to meet the nature of regional, national and global threats (Darchiashvili, 2008).

Following the August war, 2008, US-Georgian security cooperation moved to the next stage, after US troops began military training against the backdrop of increasing friction between Georgia and Russia. The purpose of the joint exercise "Immediate Response 2008" was to increase the cooperation and partnership between US and Georgian forces, which was followed by the other NATO led drills (Staff, 2008). Georgian servicemen received high level military training and got unique combat experience. participation in international missions beside military forces of NATO. Member states significantly contributed to the development of military capabilities of Georgia and the achievement of full compliance with NATO. In the aftermath, the Armed Forces of Georgia gradually transformed and upgraded as modern ones, compatible with the armed forces of the world leading countries (Center, 2017).

The evolution of NATO -Georgian relations may be subdivided into four periods. Nevertheless, the relation of the country with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization commenced in 1992, their relationship intensified under Saakashvili presidency, when, Georgia was the first country to agree on the individual Partnership Action Plan in NATO. Intensified dialogue was launched in 2006, which coincides with the intervention of the West in Afghanistan and Iraq, where Georgia started to contribute significantly to the NATO-led international security missions and in the meantime received huge support from NATO allies to train and equip Georgian forces to ensure interoperability with the Western military standards. In this regard, the country became one of the largest contributors to NATO missions in Afghanistan (Sirbiladze, 2023).

Georgian Dream on the Pro-Western Path

The change of government, that took place in 2012-2013 was the first case in Georgia's post-Soviet history, that occurred through democratic elections. The first term of Georgian dream since 2012 including 2016 had pro-Western, pro-American politicians, appointed for the positions. Their significance for US-Georgian relations during this time is worth mentioning. However, the attempt of a new power to normalize the relations with Russia grew concerns that Tbilisi might turn away from its Euro-Atlantic course. However, on the other hand, unlike the previous power, which had highly negative stance towards Russia, Georgian dream preferred less conflictual relationship (Smolnik, 2020).

The need to improve the relationship was clear. However, it has to be done in difficult conditions. Russia keeps large part of Georgian territory occupied. Russian policy makers are hostile towards deepening security cooperation between NATO and Georgia, which obstructs the country's western orientation, besides, any substantial move towards Russia would have contributed to doubts in the US and the Europe with regards to Georgia's western aspiration in its foreign policy. The country faces the challenges, on the one hand, to negotiate with Russia to reduce the hostility level and improve economic issues as a result and on the other hand, to avoid the doubts about making expression of moving to the direction of Russia (Macfarlane, 2015).

It is to be mentioned, that after coming to the power, Georgian dream retained the objective of Euro Atlantic integration. This was recorded in a cross-party resolution, adopted by the Georgian parliament in 2013, which prioritized the EU and NATO and aimed to expand relations with the United States as the ally and the most strategic partner. Following the change of power Tbilisi kept participating in US-led international missions, including the Georgian contingent in Afghanistan, which was the largest. In 2014, Georgia was declared a partner of "NATO enhanced

Opportunities” and the substantial NATO-Georgia partnership (SNGP) was launched, however, Georgia’s with for a Membership Action Plain remained unperformed.

Conclusion

Like its predecessors, the government of Georgian dream keeps boosting Georgia’s strategic significance for a partnership, however, on the other hand, the new government propagating normalization of relations with Russia is a sign that the ruling party is about to turn away from the transatlantic course of its predecessors,

or pursue it less consistently. Despite that impression, the relationship between Tbilisi and Washington has remained consistent. This applies to the security and defense policy as well. Georgia continues to host and participate in the international exercises, led by the US, as a result of which, Georgian Armed Forces received high level military training along with unique combat experience. Significant contribution to the development of Georgian military capabilities and achievement of full compliance of NATO made the Georgian Armed Forces transformed and upgraded, compatible with the ones of the world leading countries.

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