

**COMPLETING EUROPE****BY DAMON WILSON**

# Georgia's Path to NATO

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Six years after the 2008 Russia-Georgia War, unprecedented turmoil and violence in Ukraine is reinforcing doubts about the future trajectory of Europe's East. In 2008, many Western leaders concluded that the Kremlin would work to prevent NATO enlargement to other post-Soviet states. Russia's more recent strong-arm tactics to dissuade Ukraine and other Eastern Partnership states from pursuing integration with the European Union (EU) indicate that Moscow is just as committed to obstructing further progress toward a Europe whole and free and preventing any more of its neighbors from joining the West.

Against this backdrop, many European and American policymakers are ambivalent about, if not cool to, the idea of further enlargement of either NATO or the EU as they grapple with challenges at home and see only problems among the aspirants.

Yet if security in Europe's East becomes premised on Moscow's ability to dominate and intimidate its neighbors, Western allies are in store for a shockingly disruptive set of security challenges on their borders in the coming decade. Rather ensuring inevitable, even if slow, progress toward greater integration is the best course to provide predictable neighbors and borders in Europe's East. To restore a sense of stability and security on the continent's frontiers, NATO allies should begin with a concerted effort to ensure the credibility of their commitment to Georgia that it will become a member.

## Georgia Today

Georgia experienced its first democratic transfer of power through the ballot box in October 2012 when business leader Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream defeated President Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) decisively in parliamentary elections. While governing priorities differed dramatically during the twelve month cohabitation between then-Prime Minister Ivanishvili and then-President Saakashvili, defense and security policy was

## Becoming NATO's Ally

This issue brief is the first in an Atlantic Council series analyzing the future of NATO enlargement and those nations that aspire to membership. The series is part of the Council's programming on Completing Europe, which seeks to reinvigorate the policy debate in North America and Europe on advancing Euro-Atlantic integration and democratic reforms in Southeast Europe and Europe's East.

the area that remained consistent and worked best, in large part thanks to Defense Minister Irakli Alasania's effective leadership. As Saakashvili's term came to an end, Georgian Dream also won presidential elections in October 2013, after which Ivanishvili left government replacing himself with Irakli Garibashvili, Georgia's current prime minister.

Since the 2008 war, Georgia has been an "A+" NATO student. It has implemented serious defense reforms, continues to ensure its armed forces are interoperable with NATO, is developing its defensive capabilities, and has recommitted to a significant caveat-free deployment in NATO's post-International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Afghanistan mission. At the same time, under both recent governments, Georgia has managed to calm its relationship with Russia. This has been despite continued Russian provocations, most notably the erection of fences along the administrative boundary lines of the territories occupied in the 2008 war, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the gradual encroachment onto territory controlled by the state of Georgia.

Against this backdrop, Alasania came to Washington in August 2013, exactly five years after the Russian invasion of Georgia, and delivered a clear message: NATO enlargement will not continue without US leadership. He's right.

## Occupation and Enlargement

It is understandable that, today, many allies remain ambivalent about future enlargement. The current aspirants—Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Macedonia, and Montenegro—all face serious challenges. But disturbingly from Tbilisi's perspective is that most policymakers within the Alliance accept the inevitability of states of the Western Balkans joining the Alliance. However, despite the commitment at the 2008 NATO Bucharest summit that Georgia will become a member, many allied capitals harbor deep suspicions about whether this statement is credible.

To their credit, leaders such as President Barack Obama and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen have stood by the Alliance commitment.<sup>1</sup> Yet many believe that Georgia's membership in NATO is simply not viable as long as Russian forces occupy Georgian territory.

Georgia, so the argument goes, cannot possibly become a NATO member until Russia's occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia ends. Otherwise, the Alliance would be importing an inevitable conflict.

That logic is fundamentally flawed in that it cedes to Moscow the ability to determine Georgia's future with the Alliance. This only incentivizes Moscow to maintain the status quo. Indeed, Russia's successful effort to marginalize the Geneva talks on Abkhazia and South Ossetia (diplomatic talks begun in 2008 to address the disputed regions as part of the international agreement to end the fighting in Georgia) underscores Moscow is pursuing this approach.

If allied leaders aim to make any progress on the occupied territories over the long term, they need progress on the enlargement agenda in the near term to change current calculations.

### A Viable Candidate

Of course, there can be no viable strategy to welcome Georgia into NATO without a credible democracy emerging in the Caucasus. Georgia has the fundamentals of democracy now: the current government was elected democratically with a strong public mandate; the political opposition is credible and vibrant; the judiciary is less pliant than in the past; and the media environment is lively.

<sup>1</sup> As President Barack Obama said on Jan 30, 2012, when he hosted Saakashvili at the White House, "The United States will continue to support Georgia's aspirations to ultimately become a member of NATO." White House, "Remarks by President Obama and President Saakashvili of Georgia after Bilateral Meeting," January 30, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/30/remarks-president-obama-and-president-saakashvili-georgia-after-bilatera>.

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But to turn this veneer into fundamentals, Georgia must do more. The Garibashvili government must not become a hostage of the past by prosecuting former officials as a means to eliminate Saakashvili's UNM as an opposition force. There continue to be signs of politically-motivated pressure on officials associated with UNM, including at the local levels in advance of bellwether local elections this spring. Challenging UNM as a legitimate political force will undermine the government's ability to advance a positive agenda for the future and complicate consideration of how to bring Georgia closer to the Alliance or the EU.

On the other hand, competitive local elections this June, in which UNM as well as other parties represented in parliament compete, can pave the way for a genuine debate on the future of enlargement when NATO foreign ministers assess the aspirants that same month and then NATO leaders convene in Wales for the September 2014 NATO summit.

To be a viable NATO candidate, Georgia must continue to build credible democratic institutions and practices, a vibrant civil society, and an independent press. It must also continue to implement all the reforms necessary to meet Alliance standards and act as if it is already an ally.

Furthermore, by managing relations with Moscow responsibly, Georgia is building confidence among allies that it can be a reliable security partner. This means continuing to restrain the rhetoric, avoid being provoked, and seek to normalize commercial and cultural relations. But it also means not allowing Russian security services and their proxies free reign within Georgia.

Georgia is also facing the reality that Berlin has been most hesitant about its NATO aspirations and therefore is planning to embed Georgian forces in German units in future deployments to help build trust among the nations and their armed forces.

## Envisioning Membership

Against this backdrop, NATO leaders should invite the leaders of the candidate countries to participate in the Wales summit. Such a move would underscore the viability of continued enlargement and the benefits of tough reforms. NATO leaders also face a decision of whether to welcome Georgia into the Membership Action Plan, or MAP, NATO's program to help prepare nations for membership.

MAP is not membership. MAP neither leads to membership on any time frame (Albania participated in MAP for ten years before joining the Alliance), nor does it guarantee the inevitability of membership (see the case of Macedonia).

Nonetheless, the lesson of the 2008 Bucharest summit is that NATO leaders must be able to imagine Georgia as an ally at some point in the future if they are to green light Georgia into the process to prepare it to become an ally. The core question therefore is: even if Georgia gets the reform fundamentals right and meets NATO standards, how can NATO extend its security guarantee to a nation which has 20 percent of its territory occupied?

NATO's 1995 study on enlargement notes that resolution of ethnic or territorial disputes "would be a factor in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance." Notably, however, the Alliance's study did not adopt this or any other factors as rigid criteria to join the Alliance. Rather, it affirms that "enlargement will be decided on a case-by-case basis."<sup>2</sup>

NATO must return to several historical precedents to navigate to the future of an allied Georgia. The commitment among allies that an attack on one will be considered an attack on all is enshrined in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, which established the Alliance in 1949. Even then, American diplomats were concerned that European entanglements would become a security liability for the United States.

Article 6 was crafted to specifically limit areas where the security guarantee will hold, specifying the treaty's applicability to Europe and North America and "islands under the jurisdiction of any of the Parties in the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer." After much debate, the treaty negotiators also acceded to France's request that the treaty include Algeria as it was fully integrated into French structures, but rejected a similar Belgian request to include Congo.<sup>3</sup>

2 NATO, "Study on NATO Enlargement," September 3, 1995, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_24733.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_24733.htm).

3 In 1963, the North Atlantic Council declared the Algeria provision inapplicable.

Other overseas French departments which enjoyed comparable status to Algeria were also excluded. The point is that there is a precedent in defining the geography of where the treaty applies.

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Similarly, from NATO's inception, only part of a divided Germany enjoyed NATO protection. The zones of Germany formerly occupied by American, British, and French forces became the Federal Republic of Germany and a founding member of the Alliance. Despite this division, leaders of the Federal Republic of Germany like Konrad Adenauer did not sacrifice the commitment to a united Germany.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, allies made clear at the time of Turkey's accession in 1952 that the security commitment also extended to the bulk of Turkish territory considered to be in Asia.

These examples are not strictly parallel to Georgia's situation of course. Nonetheless, they provide historical precedents to guide a flexible approach to Georgia today. A democratic Georgia that otherwise meets the standards of NATO membership could be welcomed into the Alliance with the understanding that Article 5 and the Washington Treaty would not be applicable to the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Alliance members would continue to recognize Georgia's territorial integrity.

Accepting this principle, even well before Georgia qualifies for membership, would pave the way to grant Georgia (assuming it makes progress on reforms) a MAP in the near term. MAP would then provide the framework to further prepare Georgia for membership.

At the same time, this approach would restore the credibility of the Bucharest summit commitment that Georgia will become a member of NATO.

4 Adenauer presented a coherent theory about national reunification: that a highly prosperous and secure West Germany would exert an irresistible "magnetic attraction" on East Germans. William Patch, "Konrad Adenauer and the Cold War," Woodrow Wilson Center, April 4, 2006, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/conference-report-western-integration-german-unification-and-the-cold-war-the-adenauer-era>.

## Prospects for Reconciliation

In turn, the viability of Georgia's NATO aspirations offers the best prospect for making progress on Abkhazia and South Ossetia. For a Georgia that joins the Alliance while also pursuing normal ties with Moscow, Russia over time is more likely to reconcile to the reality that the occupied territories will never be widely recognized as independent states.

Such a scenario also opens the prospect for more direct engagement with the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. A secure and prosperous Georgia will be attractive to Abkhazians and South Ossetians, who are deeply reliant on Russian subsidies and, despite their Moscow-midwifed independence, bristle under Russia's political and military domination.

If Russia believes that its continued occupation would prevent Georgia's NATO membership, then that occupation threatens to become permanent.

In fact, today's ambiguity is what provides for a potentially combustible situation. Moscow's interest in a successful Sochi Winter Olympics has dissuaded Russian authorities from seeking to destabilize Georgia. However, after the Olympics and the perceived setback of their interests in Ukraine, and in the run-up to the next NATO summit in September 2014, some in Moscow may see a window of opportunity to return to an old playbook of raising tensions in the region to "remind" those in allied capitals that investing in Georgia is too risky.

## Stability and Enlargement

Ambiguity, including no decision, brings risks. Granting Georgia a MAP and starting a process that can lead to membership will help stabilize the region.

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During debates on NATO enlargement in the 1990s, policymakers in allied capitals, including Washington, scoffed at the idea of the Baltic states joining the Alliance, arguing that such a step was too provocative and destabilizing.

They were wrong. The security, stability, and predictability of embedding the Baltic states within NATO is what has allowed for the normalization in relations between these former Soviet republics and Russia. At that time, each of these nations also had Russian troops stationed on their territory. Today, Estonia has a border treaty with Russia, Latvia is cooperating with Russia on facilitating transit to Afghanistan, and Vladimir Putin has welcomed Lithuania's leaders in Moscow. This outcome would not have been possible without US leadership, as well as the active engagement of Germany and the Nordic countries.

Furthermore, in light of the growing concern about jihadist fighters transiting between Syria and the North Caucasus, a Georgia in NATO could be a net plus for Russia in terms of containing violent extremism.

By imaging a democratic Georgia within NATO and welcoming the nation into MAP, the Alliance can help Georgia consolidate reforms, strengthen the Alliance, and help stabilize the broader Black Sea region. European security, long thought to be the backwater of global security challenges, has returned to the forefront as a newly emboldened and revanchist Russia under Vladimir Putin seeks to take advantage of the ambiguity casting a shadow over Europe's East.

A clear and coordinated transatlantic strategy toward the region, including keeping an extended hand to Russia as part of a vision of a Europe whole and free, can help ensure near-term stability and security. Inviting Georgia to begin the MAP process is the best starting point to achieve this and will require creative thinking, effective diplomacy, and US leadership.

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