



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
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THE WEAK LINK DILEMMA

SHOTA UTIASHVILI

80

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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Any country aspiring for NATO membership should meet five principal criteria:¹

- Functioning democratic political system based on a market economy
- Fair treatment of minority populations
- Commitment to peaceful resolution of conflicts
- Ability and willingness to make a military contribution to NATO operations
- Commitment to democratic civil-military relations and institutional structures

Upon meeting these requirements, as per Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty, any European state “in a position to further the principles of the Treaty to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area” may, by unanimous agreement of the Parties, be invited to accede to the Treaty and become a member of the Alliance.²

The ongoing debates in Georgia around NATO membership are often centered on the fulfillment of the above criteria and issues that prevail in terms of reaching a consensus among the parties. This paper aims to review the requirement pertaining to the maintenance of North Atlantic security by aspirant countries.

“The maintenance of security in the North Atlantic area” is a rather broad concept. At first glance, it is difficult to imagine how the small and weak Georgia should contribute to the security of such a vast space. Although, logically, the minimum condition stemming from this requirement is the fact that by accepting Georgia, NATO (including Georgia) would become more secure than it would be without Georgia’s accession; that is, Georgia should not constitute a weak link for the security of the Alliance.

NATO is recognized as the most powerful military alliance of all time; so powerful, in fact, that no one has yet dared to test its strength which rests on two equally significant pillars: military force and solid unity.

All NATO member states are aware that they can rely on Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty in the case of a foreign attack which stipulates that an armed attack against one is considered as an attack against all. Clearly, it is of no consequence whether or not the victim of the aggression is a

large or small state. NATO's power lies in the fact that even in the case of an attack against the smallest member state, the larger and stronger parties will protect it using armed force, if necessary, even if this means putting themselves under the threat of nuclear attack. If not for this assurance, Alliance membership would carry far less weight in the eyes of, for instance, the Baltic or Eastern European states.

When comparing NATO and Russia's economic and military capacities, the former has a clear advantage. The population of NATO member states is 900 million while Russia's is 140 million. NATO's joint gross domestic product (GDP) amounts to USD 40 trillion while Russia's GDP constitutes USD 1.5 trillion. NATO's overall military expenditure is approximately USD 1 trillion³ while Russia's military spending amounts to USD 66 billion.⁴ Moreover, there is no doubt that NATO also prevails in terms of modern military technology.

Back in 2010, the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, announced that in the nearest decade, Russia was aiming to expend RUB 20 trillion (over USD 300 billion at the current rate) towards weapons modernization.⁵ Despite the fact that Russia continues to exponentially increase its military spending, taking into account the magnitude of the gap with NATO as well as the uneasy status of the Russian economy, achieving military parity with NATO seems an impossible feat.

To what, then, does Putin aspire and why do an increasing number of NATO officials and experts consider Russia as the principal military threat?

Some experts, including the former Deputy Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (SACEUR), General Sir Richard Shirreff, state that Putin's primary advantage is the fact that despite a lack of resources, he possesses a much more steadfast resolve to fight as compared to his Western colleagues.⁶ Action taken in Ukraine and Syria serve as examples to underpin such conclusions. In both cases, Putin's strategy has relied on the assumption that in the case of military escalation, the West would be unable or unwilling to undertake such a significant risk which Putin, on the contrary, was prepared to do. In fact, in both of these cases, Putin's strategy proved successful (as it did several years earlier in Georgia). As a result of military action, Russia was able to secure a military advantage in both Ukraine and Syria (albeit temporarily).

What happens if Putin decides to run an even higher risk?

And what could constitute this high risk?

Prior to answering these questions, let us briefly discuss that which Russia considers as its major national interest.⁷ Russian government officials openly speak about the “multipolar world;” that is, a world order where everything is settled not by rules or international law but by a handful of powerful states (the United States, Russia, China and, possibly, the EU) which agree on the rules of the game and smaller states are obliged to abide by their decisions. According to the Russian model, these large states should also make a commitment not to intervene in each other’s spheres of influence.

Achieving this objective, at the current stage, is very difficult since Russia and NATO are not equal power centers as evidenced by the figures above. The West does not wish to relinquish the world order which hinges on international law, democratic principles and free trade. As long as NATO, Europe and the US are united, Russia should not harbor any hope that its strategic task will materialize.

Russia has made several attempts to disrupt the EU-US unity. We can recall the Putin-Schröder-Chirac alliance against George W. Bush and the Second Iraq War. Putin attempted to align himself with the large Western European states and distance them from the United States to the maximum possible extent. Russia was the principal supplier of gas to the EU and it used this commodity as a geopolitical weapon. Russia offered an appealing market to European exporters and provided attractive investment opportunities for European capital. Putin proposed his personal friendship, with all ensuing benefits, to European leaders (one can recall the former German Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, or the former Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi). Ultimately, however, Russia failed to secure Western European favor. Following the actions committed in Ukraine and Syria, which numerous high-profile international organizations have assessed as war crimes,^{8 9} as well as the mounting authoritarianism in Russia, the impact of Russian “soft power” on Europe declined. Technological breakthroughs, including shale gas development and the emergence of opportunities for the transit of liquefied natural gas, mean that the exploitation of Russian gas as an “energy weapon” has also been placed under threat.

Presently, Russia has shifted its tactics although its objective remains unaltered: its key objective continues to center around bringing discord into NATO which gains urgency as relations between NATO and Russia are becoming tenuous.

Seventeen US intelligence agencies drew independent conclusions about Russia's involvement in the 2016 US presidential election.¹⁰ Russian hackers targeted Democratic servers and with the approaching election, began to trickle material compromising the Democratic Party and its candidate. The degree to which these actions impacted the outcome of the election is unknown but it is a fact that Russia took active efforts to support Trump's victory.

The supporters of the most pro-European candidate in the French presidential election, Emmanuel Macron, openly state that the Russian information or misinformation machine is actively working against them.¹¹ The possible intervention by Russian special services has also been mentioned by Germany.¹²

In any case, Russian-backed candidates are those who employ anti-establishment rhetoric and, in addition, combat globalization and its concomitant circumstances: a liberal international trade regime, migration and international instruments and organizations such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) or the European Union.

Given the above, we can assume that via lending support to populist candidates in Western countries, Putin is attempting to spur dissonance and is prepared to take significant risks for this purpose. It is yet unknown whether or not Russia will benefit as a result of Trump's election; however, damage has already been dealt in the form of an additional package of sanctions imposed by the US.

In addition to bribing politicians and supporting populists, Russia can, in theory, take an even more risky or, one might say, imprudent step in order to undermine NATO's unity.

In Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014 and Syria in 2016, despite significant differences, Russia adhered to the same exact scenario: deployment of troops, territorial occupation and then engaging in negotiations.

Russian military operations in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria did not lead to a

split in the West; on the contrary, each subsequent military provocation by Russia has been met with increasingly more solid unity in the West.

If Russia's military intervention in Georgia was not followed by any retaliatory Western embargo against Russia, in Ukraine's case, due to the occupation of both Crimea and eastern Ukraine, strict and severe sanctions were imposed.

It is relatively simple to find a consensus regarding sanctions. Germany, which is Russia's major economic partner in the EU, exports more goods to Poland than Russia. The economic losses that the EU undertakes by restricting trade with Russia are much less than the losses suffered by Russia itself.¹³

However, what will happen if Russia forces NATO to face a more difficult choice than the sanctions?

What will happen in the case of Russia invading a NATO member state, fully or partially occupying it, and thus pushing NATO to make a choice between the following options: to give effect to Article 5, engage in armed resistance with the aggressor and face the threat of a full-scale war, including a potential nuclear war, with Russia or avoid resorting to armed retaliation, effectively evading the threat of nuclear war but fundamentally undermining NATO's unity.

One of the most prominent analytical centers, the RAND Corporation, has recently published its study findings¹⁴ according to which, given the troops and weapons amassed in Russia's Western Military District, the military potential of the Baltic countries as well as NATO forces and equipment deployed in the immediate vicinity of the Baltic states, Russia would require a maximum of 60 hours to reach the outskirts of Riga or Tallinn (in order to preclude a rapid overrun of the Baltic states by Russia, the study reports that NATO would need to station a force of six-to-seven infantry brigades, including three heavily armored brigades, within the Baltic states or in their immediate vicinity. Expenses for the establishment of these brigades would amount to a maximum of USD 13 billion while maintenance costs would constitute USD 2.7 billion annually).

Military analysts are obligated to always consider the worst-case scenario. What might the consequences be if Russia unexpectedly attacks and occupies one of the Baltic countries? NATO leadership will be faced with

a difficult choice: the threat of a third world war or leaving an ally at the mercy of the aggressor. Clearly, if NATO opts for the latter, it will virtually cease to exist as a military alliance.

During military maneuvers in March 2015, which consolidated up to 80 thousand Russian troops, the Russian Army simulated an invasion of the Baltic states.¹⁵ According to the scenario, Russian airborne troops supported by helicopters and artillery launched an assault against Latvia. The Russian Baltic Sea Fleet at the time carried out air defense operations and search and destroy missions. The Northern Fleet conducted similar exercises, engaging strategic bombers and fighter jets. Meanwhile, the Russian Black Sea Fleet carried out anti-submarine sweeps.

In response to the Russian military maneuvers, NATO conducted four exercises in the same year, engaging 15,000 soldiers.¹⁶ The scenario of these drills implied infantry deployment in Poland and Sweden and joint actions against Kaliningrad, a second tank battle on Baltic and Polish territory. It is noteworthy that the third exercise saw the “christening” of the NATO Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF).¹⁷

Significantly, the VJTF was established for the purpose of neutralizing emerging military threats in Europe posed by Russia.¹⁸ The Task Force serves as a guarantee for Eastern European countries that in the event of a *blitzkrieg* by Russia, NATO will immediately come to their aid and not allow Russia to proceed with occupation and present these countries and NATO as a whole with a *fait accompli*.

Why are the Baltic states seen as the weakest point for NATO? The primary reason is geographic. Estonia and Latvia directly border Russia while Lithuania shares a border with the Russian Kaliningrad oblast. NATO has no land border with the Baltic states with the exception of the 100 km-wide “Suwalki corridor” linking Lithuania and Poland. Belarus is located to the east of the corridor while the Russian Kaliningrad oblast borders to the west. In military terms, Russia views Belarusian territory as its own. Hence, military experts fear that in the case of war, Russia will be able to block the corridor.

The second reason for the above is Russian deployment of a new set of anti-ship and anti-aircraft weaponry as well as the Iskander short-range ballistic missiles in the Kaliningrad oblast. The impact range of the S-400

air defense missile is 400 km.¹⁹ Kaliningrad is also host to the Bal land-based anti-ship missile system and the Bastion mobile anti-ship defense system.²⁰ In 2012 and 2016, Iskander ballistic missiles were also deployed in the area.²¹

All in all, the strategy Russia employs in the Baltic region is known as A2AD (Anti Access/Area Denial). The strategy aims to transform a given geographical region into a zone inaccessible to opponents and severely restrict their movement in the region. If Russia moves to attack the Baltic states, its objective will be to blockade aerial and naval routes in order to prevent NATO ships and aircraft from reaching their Baltic allies or to ensure that they do so at great cost.

Another key factor that diminishes the security of the Baltic states is clearly the vulnerability of the countries' armed forces. Lithuanian armed forces comprise 17,000 military servicepersons and the country's defense budget for 2017 amounts to EUR 725 million. Latvian armed forces are composed of up to 5,000 soldiers, supplemented by 8,000 National Guard combatants. The defense budget in Latvia is EUR 450 million. The Estonian army consists of 5,750 troops, reinforced by 12,000 combatants of the Estonian Defense League. The country's defense budget constitutes EUR 477 million.

Following Russian aggression in Ukraine, all three Baltic countries took the decision to significantly increase their military spending. Estonia has purchased 44 armored vehicles and six Leopard tanks from the Netherlands and 40 units of Stinger air-defense systems from the United States. Tallinn is also purchasing new self-propelled artillery.

Latvia has procured 123 armored vehicles and 800 Carl Gustaf anti-tank recoilless rifles.

Lithuanians have purchased Polish Grom portable air-defense systems and Javelin anti-tank missiles from the US.

Moreover, Lithuania, as well as Sweden, has reverted from a professional-only army model and reinstated compulsory military service.

The list of acquired weapons is a clear indicator that the principal objective for the Baltic states is to mount maximum resistance to Russian tank and aerial assaults.

At first glance, the EUR 300 million expended by the Baltic states pales in comparison to Russia's immense military budget and massive rearming program but only at first glance.

The Baltics are aware that they will be faced with a real threat if the Kremlin believes that it will be able to occupy all three states in one fell swoop since Russia may assume that if NATO is presented with a *fait accompli*, some members of the Alliance may hesitate to act. In the case of Russia being unable to rapidly overrun all three states and NATO bears witness not to the accomplished fact but to a situation where the Baltic states are embroiled in war, then the vacillators will find it much more difficult to abandon their allies in such a state. In other words, extending the defensive war by several days (or, more precisely, the amount of time Russia presumes it would take to occupy the Baltic states) may decide the fate of these countries.

How does all of the above apply to Georgia?

First and foremost, there are obvious parallels between Russian strategies in the Baltic and Black Seas. Following the occupation of Crimea, Russia began amassing weapons on the peninsula identical to those deployed in the Kaliningrad oblast.^{22 23} In late 2016, Russia and Armenia signed an agreement on the establishment of a joint air defense system.²⁴ By means of the S-300 air defense systems deployed in Gyumri, Armenia and Abkhazia, Russia has nearly complete control over Georgian airspace. The S-400 deployed in Crimea lends command of the eastern part of the Black Sea. Russia has significantly improved relations with Turkey, the only NATO member-state neighboring Georgia. To put it mildly, the Georgian military budget and, therefore, military capabilities, are not increasing in contrast with almost all of Russia's Western neighbors. Western skeptics have every reason to believe that even in the case of Georgia's accession to NATO and its attainment of the MAP, Georgia will replace the Baltics as NATO's weakest link and, according to some, it may even be seductively weak. Consequently, against the background of the hostilities between Ukraine and Russia, progress in NATO-Georgia relations has slowed considerably.

This situation is categorically unacceptable for Georgia. To return to the question posed at the beginning of this paper on whether or not Euro-Atlantic security would be bolstered with Georgia's NATO membership, more and more specialists will give a negative answer. Thus, it is essential

to launch a discussion both within the country as well as with our international partners: what must be done in order to put an end to this negative dynamic and prevent Georgia from becoming a long-term weak link in the realm of Euro-Atlantic security.

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