



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

GEORGIA'S NATO INTEGRATION – STRATEGIC PATIENCE

SHOTA GVINERIA

84

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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Big News in Transatlantic Security

Since last year's presidential elections in the US, the main foreign policy and security topic across the globe has been the future of transatlantic relations. The opinions have been polarized and stretched across the board, not only in the US but also in Europe. Many argue that President Trump will no longer support the post-Cold War rules-based order and turn down his role as the leader of the free world. Others contend that he is too tough for any sort of concessions with his potential adversaries; therefore, his strong deal-making skills will make America great again. One very important aspect of these deliberations is if geopolitics will finally come back as the guiding factor and if there will be a new deal between the global players on the division of the spheres of influence. This global uncertainty is affecting the small frontline countries, like Georgia, which has been the region's most loyal partner for the West and is expecting the final push on its European, as well as Euro-Atlantic, integration paths. The window of opportunity for Georgia to receive the invitation for joining the Alliance is less likely until the current global turmoil settles down and there is more clarity on key US policies such as Europe whole, free and at peace and NATO's longstanding 'open door' policy.

Obviously, the debate on world order and the US global leadership will continue for a while, but in any case, April 7, 2017 will play a decisive role in outlining the future foreign policy of Donald Trump's administration. The message communicated by the White House through the missile strike on Assad's Sharyat airfield, in response to the use of chemical weapons in northwestern Syria, is powerful.¹ The message to Assad, that he really does not have any political future, is a secondary one. The primary message has been sent to America's allies that the US is actually willing and able to use force to protect its national interests, the interests of its allies and their shared values. Another primary message was sent to America's adversaries that the era of complacency is over and the Kremlin's joy at the election outcome was largely premature. There are still a lot of deliberations about the nature of the operation launching 59 US Tomahawk missiles. It is still unclear whether or not this was part of a broader strategy of US engagement in the Middle East, Trump's enhanced measures in the fight against terrorism or just an isolated reactive action.

There was another power move of sending the naval strike group to the Korean peninsula on the next day after the strike.² It is obvious that the strong US presence in the western Pacific and its clear demonstration

of commitment to act against the further development of Pyongyang's nuclear program is another important reassurance for America's allies in the region and a strong deterrent for the others.³ As a crown jewel to the other two, a third message of strength was delivered through dropping the so-called 'Mother of all bombs' (MOAB), the largest non-nuclear bomb in the US arsenal, effectively destroying massive ISIS underground facilities in Afghanistan.⁴ All events indicate that the leadership role of the US in ensuring peace and stability in Europe and Asia is on its way upwards. Even though no one doubted America's vast supremacy as a military superpower before the abovementioned developments, these power-projecting acts were a timely response to the doubts about the ability of the US to effectively use the power it undoubtedly owns. Signs of robust and active foreign policy are very good news for US overseas partners, such as Georgia, whose chance to achieve tangible progress towards its strategic objective of NATO membership mostly depends on a vigorous push from Washington.

NATO Snapshot

The power-projection by the US administration was widely supported and praised by most of its major transatlantic allies.⁵ Clearly, many of them have been worried about Trump's commitment to Euro-Atlantic security. It was also not obvious that the traditional US deterrent factor in ensuring peace and stability in Europe would still stand. In this light, it is still not clear what Trump's transatlantic pattern of relations will be and what would serve as the transatlantic bridge in his era. The messages of the new administration on NATO have been somewhat mixed as well. While Presidential candidate Trump was calling NATO obsolete during his campaign, his Secretary of Defense, Mattis, was as explicit as possible in emphasizing the strong US commitment to NATO during his first ministerial meeting in February 2017.⁶ Yet another confusing move from DC was the new state secretary's decision to skip the first NATO foreign ministerial gathering since he took office. The Allies had to renegotiate the dates of the meeting in order to fit everyone's agenda and avoid conflict with Secretary Tillerson's schedule.

Finally, the Allied foreign ministers, including Tillerson, successfully met on March 31 to discuss, among other issues, the agenda of the special Summit scheduled for May 25, 2017. The Summit is special for many reasons. Firstly, this is because the multiplicity of conventional and hybrid security challenges that the Alliance has to deal with are indeed extraordinary.

Secondly (or perhaps firstly), because it will be the first NATO Summit for President Donald Trump and the expectation is that his messages will, to a certain extent, outline answers to the outstanding question regarding the future of the transatlantic link. The expectations within the Alliance are that this special meeting will send a strong message of transatlantic unity and once again reconfirm the unequivocal commitment of all of the Allies to the obligations under the North Atlantic Treaty.

As a result of the abovementioned Defense and Foreign Ministerial meetings, the main agenda items of the so-called Mini-Summit are more or less clear.⁷ President Trump, in his joint press conference with NATO Secretary General, Stoltenberg, explicitly emphasized that he is pleased with how the Allies responded to his priorities.⁸ The main priority for Trump will be to push for strengthening the transatlantic bond through fair burden sharing. The fair burden sharing was defined at the Wales Summit as early as 2014 when the Allies decided that in order to overcome modern security challenges, every one of them should gradually increase their defense spending to reach 2% of their GDP threshold.⁹ Despite the fact that at this point only a few Allies are close to the 2% benchmark, the big achievement is that all of the member states stopped cutting defense spending and there is a trend of an overall increase of around USD 10 billion.¹⁰ The Allies also agreed to table plans for a gradual increase in defense spending until they reach an agreed standard. Another important issue on Trump's agenda will be to enhance NATO focus on the fight against terrorism, in general, and ISIS, in particular. Progress on these two issues has made NATO no longer obsolete.

One major issue which still hangs in limbo is Trump's stance on the open door policy. Despite the understandable fact that no partners are invited to the special meeting, Montenegro's participation as a full-fledged member of the Alliance is a powerful signal to other aspirants that NATO's door remains open, not only on paper but also in practice. Nonetheless, aspirant countries like Georgia are still looking forward to some more reassurances of the allied commitment to enlargement. The US has always been the driving force for the enlargement process and also in the case of Georgia, the so-called 'window of opportunity' will open only as a result of Washington's robust leadership. Recent history in Georgia and Ukraine proved that any ambiguity in the West's intention to stand up for its partners has encouraged the Kremlin to double down on its revisionist agenda which is a serious threat to Euro-Atlantic security as a whole.

Russia – Elephant or Bear in the Room

The last NATO Summit in Warsaw explicitly defined Russia as a significant threat which the Alliance is facing from the east: “Russia’s aggressive actions, including provocative military activities in the periphery of NATO territory and its demonstrated willingness to attain political goals by the threat and use of force, are a source of regional instability, fundamentally challenge the Alliance, have damaged Euro-Atlantic security and threaten our long-standing goal of a Europe whole, free and at peace.”¹¹ The conceptual response of the Alliance to this threat is outlined as ‘strong defense and deterrence combined with dialogue.’ The main paradigm of this approach is based on the understanding that a dialogue with such an aggressive adversary as Russia is only possible through the position of strength.

From his own perspective, President Putin is testing the new administration’s patience and is trying to understand how far he can go with his revisionist agenda without triggering a real response from the US. Putin is testing the water by boosting Russia’s military activities in the Middle East and bolstering the de facto annexation of Eastern Ukraine and the occupied regions of Georgia. This first action is aimed at validating his claim of Russia being a global power and the latter, while damaging the US-led rules-based international order, is effectively undermining the idea of the inviolability of internationally recognized borders and the sovereign choice of countries to choose their own future and alliances.

In this context, in February 2017, Putin signed an executive order recognizing the documents issued by the Russian-backed separatists in Donbas.¹² In March, Russia signed a defense agreement with the occupation regime in South Ossetia which announced the merger of local armed groups with Russian armed forces.¹³ Later, Russia also authorized a referendum on changing the name of the occupied region to the Republic of South Ossetia–State of Alania, a move that was condemned by Georgia and its international partners as a step towards the absorption of this territory and an indirect threat to merge it with the RF’s Republic of North Ossetia–Alania.¹⁴ Russia’s muscle flexing in Ukraine and Georgia is obviously a part of its revisionist fight directed against the West and its liberal order in the first place. With its destructive actions against Western Allies, Russia attempts to destabilize these counties primarily to prevent their integration in European and Euro-Atlantic structures. On top of these objectives, Russia can easily use Ukraine and or Georgia to retaliate against

the West for its moves which conflict with Russia's interests elsewhere such as the strike in Syria, for example.

Some commentators argue that there is hardly any room for normalizing relations between Trump's America and Putin's Russia as their interests in various geopolitical theaters are inherently contradictory and neither of the tough Presidents is prepared for a real compromise. Some conspiracy lovers also add that the Russian people started to realize that the 'glorious return of Crimea' could not feed them which means that Putin will seek escalation in order to blame internal hardships on external enemies. Others, on the contrary, argue that some unhealthy relations between Trump's team and Russia were preset during the election campaign and there will be no escape from the KGB which will result in a 'big deal' damaging the interests of the US and its transatlantic allies.

From this perspective, Secretary Tillerson's visit to Moscow, preceded by the abovementioned power projection moves by the US, triggered worldwide attention. In the meeting between the two ministers as well as in Tillerson's meeting with President Putin, Syria was the lengthiest topic of discussion. The gap between the objectives and the positions on this issue was very visible through the official press conference after the meetings.¹⁵ Russia's openly declared interest to retain Assad in power is a driver for Russia's military actions which often challenges the US-led coalition's efforts against ISIS. The sides could not even agree on the evidently proven fact of the illicit use of chemical weapons by Assad's forces against civilians. According to many security experts, the multiplicity of such core differences on a number of issues makes a Russia-US joint fight against ISIS very unlikely. Even in the case of a political agreement to cooperate, it will be very difficult to find avenues for joint military actions on the ground as interoperability, trust and sharing of sensitive information between the two militaries look hardly possible.

Thus, the future US policy on Russia is closely linked to two key issues of global importance. First, the rules-based international order, in turn tied with the implementation of the Minsk agreement on Ukraine and the open door policy vis-à-vis NATO aspirants including Georgia. Second, the fight against terrorism, including the Syrian issue, ISIS/DAESH, Afghanistan and even North Korea. On top, the painful Western sanctions imposed on Russia for its aggression in Ukraine are an important piece of the puzzle. For the West, sanctions serve as a straightjacket to keep Russia in check. Accordingly, debilitating the US leadership on keeping the Western

consensus on the sanctions is one of the primary objectives Putin wants to achieve with Trump. This overarching set of composite issues will largely guide Russia's relation with the West and influence third parties as well, especially in the vulnerable and contested Black Sea region.

How can Georgia Strengthen Euro-Atlantic Security?

Georgia's ambition to join NATO is perfectly legitimate and realistic. NATO integration is Georgia's irreversible foreign and security policy objective as it represents the most effective, or perhaps the only, way to further enhance its security and promote stability in the whole Black Sea region. This civilizational decision is a subject of nationwide consensus in Georgia. During the NATO Warsaw Summit, the six parliamentary parties that had substantial internal policy disagreements alongside with the President, Prime Minister and the Chair of the Parliament of Georgia submitted an 'all party declaration,' once again reconfirming the country's aspiration to achieve full integration in the Euro-Atlantic institutions.¹⁶ Earlier, the around 70 mainstream Georgian civil society organizations also pledged their strong support for Georgia's NATO integration through the open letter to the North Atlantic Council, encouraging the Alliance to accelerate the integration process and give Georgia a clear roadmap to the eventual membership.¹⁷ Both statements are a logical reflection of the overwhelming Georgian public support for NATO: 82% of citizens completely or somewhat support Georgia in NATO according to the latest polls published by the International Republican Institute on March 8 of this year.¹⁸

In its own turn, NATO also unanimously supported Georgia's aspiration to join the Alliance at the Bucharest Summit where all member states clearly stated that Georgia will become a member of NATO.¹⁹ This milestone modality naturally represents a core principle of NATO-Georgia relations. The decision has been the driving force for Georgia to continue its NATO integration process as an aspirant country and the remarkable progress it has achieved since then. In light of the current strategic political and security environment in the Euro-Atlantic area, it is essential that Georgia-NATO relations are always discussed in the context of enlargement which will ensure continuity of the integration agenda and demonstrate NATO's loyalty towards its own decisions.

At this point, NATO rightly focuses on strengthening the transatlantic bond and the security of the member states, especially in the eastern flank of the Alliance. Nonetheless, special emphasis should remain on involving

strategic partners, such as Georgia, as much as possible. Cooperative and inclusive security is not only urgently needed for Georgia's national security as strong political support from the Alliance but it is also crucial in terms of the enhanced regional defense cooperation. NATO's more active involvement in strengthening stability in the Black Sea region should give Georgia more access to existing NATO programs and activities which in turn will extend the country's capacity to share the burden of common responsibility for promoting stability in this most exposed component of Euro-Atlantic security. This is important not only because Russia's new 'iron curtain' intends to go through the Black Sea, but because of practical and operational needs as well. From the perspective of adequately responding to Russia's aggressive militarization in the region and its sophisticated A2AD bubbles, security needs Georgia as much as Georgia needs security.*

The study on NATO enlargement, conducted by the Alliance in 1995, confirms that enlargement is part of the broader European security architecture "that transcends and renders obsolete the idea of 'dividing lines' in Europe."²⁰ According to this main guideline document for the implementation of the open door policy: "there is no fixed or rigid list of criteria for inviting new member states to join the Alliance" and "enlargement will be decided on a case by case basis." Often, the document refers to Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty which says that "any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area" can be invited to accede to the Treaty. Moreover, it is obvious that the only alternative to the open door policy and keeping up integration ambitions of one of the most advanced and interoperable aspirants is the indirect acknowledgement of the new division lines in Europe.

On its part, Georgia has long proven itself to be a reliable security provider. Today's heavy focus on the issue of defense spending further strengthened Georgia's credentials as it has steadily shared a fair burden of the minimum 2% benchmark for years. Undoubtedly, Georgia is also a reliable partner in the fight against terrorism, having been part of all NATO-led counter-terrorism missions. Currently, Georgia is the largest per-capita contributor to the ongoing Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan. Such an impressive track record of defense and security cooperation with NATO insured the highest level of interoperability of the Georgian armed forces with those of the member states, not leaving any doubts that a small country with scarce

* For more details on the issue, please see the author's earlier publication in the Expert Opinion series. Accessible at: www.gfsis.org/files/library/opinion-papers/72-expert-opinion-eng.pdf.

resources 'can pinch above its weight' and become a significant contributor to Euro-Atlantic security. Nonetheless, there are some skeptical opinions on Georgia's future prospects of NATO membership. Mainly, there are three baskets of arguments or reasons to indicate that Georgia is not yet ready to join the Alliance – defensibility, occupied territories and a reform agenda.

The first line of the arguments, while admitting Georgia's remarkable role as security provider, contends that the country still cannot adequately address the security threats and challenges it is facing and, therefore, in the case of membership, this will add vulnerability to the Alliance's eastern flank. This narrative is further supported by the claim that a real breakthrough in Georgia's membership process will be seen as a provocative action and could trigger an aggressive response from the Russian Federation. This narrative refers to the same defensibility problem that was widely used by Russian propaganda aimed at undermining the credibility of Article 5 vis-à-vis the Baltic States and Poland, raising questions about NATO's readiness to defend those countries in the case of a Russian conventional and or hybrid attack. After the decisions made at the Warsaw Summit on an enhanced forward presence in the eastern flank and the applicability of Article 5 in the case of a hybrid attack, there is little doubt left that the Alliance will equally defend itself from Virginia Beach (the US) to Narva (Estonia). In a similar manner, in the case of Georgia's membership in NATO, the extension of the security guarantees and the deterrent effect of collective defense will be the assurance that no adversary would consider crossing the line to trigger Article 5.

Furthermore, the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of Donbas, while Ukraine's constitution still clearly withholds the possibility of joining foreign military alliances, is bulletproof evidence that Russia does not need to be further provoked to destabilize its neighbors. In the latter case, the so-called provoking or motivating factor for Russia's aggression was to prevent the signature of the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine. Earlier in 2008, a promise of eventual membership to Georgia – not substantiated with a real roadmap, the so-called Membership Action Plan (MAP) – was a signal for Russia that the Allies were too divided to deliver tangible action in support of Georgia which motivated the Kremlin to distance Georgia from membership through military aggression. Both facts once again confirm that Russia tries to 'weaponize' destabilization to keep the West out of its neighborhood. A visible interconnection between the Georgian and Ukrainian cases from this retrospective shows that this

dangerous pattern of achieving geopolitical objectives by using military force, if proven successful, could be repeatedly used by Russia against any non-NATO member state on its periphery to further undermine the existing European security paradigm.

The second line of skeptical arguments is based on the study on NATO enlargement which ambiguously touches upon the obstacles for issuing the invitation for NATO membership. According to the document: “states which have ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes, including irredentist claims, or internal jurisdictional disputes must settle those by peaceful means in accordance with the OSCE principles.”²¹ The text, albeit with some strategic ambiguity, mentions that the resolution of such disputes “would be a factor” in the decision making process on the invitation. It is noteworthy that the document sets a general guiding principle of conflict resolution to the aspirant countries and there is no reference to a precondition for membership. In the case of Georgia, it is clear that one of the objectives of the Russian occupation of Georgia’s regions is to undermine the country’s Euro-Atlantic integration. Accordingly, if these conflicts become an effective foreign policy tool for Russia to veto NATO’s further enlargement process, which the Kremlin openly declares as a threat to its national interests, there will be little chance to stabilize those ‘gray zones’ in Europe’s periphery. Furthermore, such an indirect veto power will motivate Russia to mastermind new conflicts, as happened in Ukraine’s case, to undercut the extension of freedom and stability in Europe further eastwards.

It is obvious that the defensibility argument as well as the argument on conflicts raise legitimate security concerns which should be addressed from a wider strategic perspective, on one hand, and purely from the security perspective, on the other. It is also true that both issues might closely associate Georgia’s membership with greater short- to medium-term risks of confrontation with Russia. Nonetheless, from the strategic perspective, the only alternative to the enlargement and the further extension of the security umbrella in a long run will be the legitimization of new division lines and the recognition of Russia’s spheres of influence in its neighborhood. Purely from the security perspective, there is a wide range of creative solutions available to tackle both problems if the political decision to find solutions, rather than use those problems as a motive to protract integration process, is there. To this end, because a stable and strong Georgia best serves the interests of strengthened Euro-Atlantic security, practical cooperation to further strengthen Georgia’s defense

capabilities and resilience is well underway in NATO, as well as with the key member states, in a bilateral format.

The unequivocal support to Georgia's territorial integrity and the robust 'non-recognition' policy of the Allies is a solid base for discussions on the role of the occupation in the integration process. Another important aspect of further deliberations on the occupation issue in Georgia's NATO integration context is its long-standing unilateral pledge of the non-use of force. Just like in the Federal Republic of Germany's accession case, Georgia self-obligated to solve conflict only by peaceful means.²² There are many more useful parallels between the two cases. The territories of Germany back then were and those of Georgia still are under Soviet/Russian occupation. Notably, because of the occupation, the Washington Treaty applied only to West Germany before the peaceful reunification of the country. The Soviet Union then recognized and Russia still recognizes the so-called independence of the occupied territories but the Allies have rigidly followed the non-recognition policy thereby successfully delegitimizing recognition in both instances. Neither of the countries had diplomatic relations or agreed state borders with the occupying power. There is no doubt that in the search for real-time solutions, this historic precedent should be fine-tuned to today's geopolitical realities. For instance, the official recognition of Georgia's territories by NATO as occupied could be a tangible indicator towards a stronger Allied commitment, not only to the non-recognition policy but also to the strong political support towards the peaceful reintegration process. In this regard, the President of the US set a perfect example in May 2017 by signing the Consolidated Appropriations Act, declaring Abkhazia and South Ossetia as Russian-occupied territories and banning financial support for any country recognizing the independence of the two regions.²³

The third basket of skeptical arguments – the so-called 'homework' – is more of a political nature. NATO is a values-based Alliance in the first place and naturally, one of the key factors conducive to the invitation of a country to membership is its solid democratic credentials. The extensive democratic reform agenda supervised by the Allies through various NATO tools is often referred to as the 'homework' which is aimed at helping aspirant countries strengthen their democratic institutions and upgrade to Western standards. Although this is one of the keys to assessing the readiness of aspirant countries for membership, clearer criteria for accurate evaluation means should be put in place. The absence of clear requirements makes completing the homework a moving target and a

subject of political deliberations. This is where strategic patience comes in which means preparing and waiting for the appropriate moment – the window of opportunity – for taking political decisions.

Georgia has a unique standing in the region when it comes to democratic development. It is fair to say that Georgia has been the frontrunner – a poster child – in promoting democratic values in the region for more than a decade. The country with its young democracy, not without difficulties at some points, has been constantly performing and delivering on the democratic transformation agenda; according to many experts, Georgia has already successfully moved from transformation to the stage of democratic consolidation. In terms of the political decision, Georgia's case is very special as the heads of state and governments of NATO member states already took their decision on Georgia's membership in Bucharest back in 2008. Accordingly, at this point Georgia is encouraged to wait for the window of opportunity when the consensus on issuing the invitation, rather than on the membership issue, will be possible.

Meanwhile, contemporary information warfare tools are increasingly being used to undermine Georgia's security, democracy and its European and Euro-Atlantic integration course as a part of Russia's worldwide efforts against the democratic processes ongoing in the country. The most damaging narrative of the anti-Western propaganda in the region is aimed at strengthening nihilistic sentiments and questioning the viability of Georgia's foreign policy orientation. Therefore, the only effective way to counter the disinformation is to constantly update internal and external audiences on Georgia's progress and specific deliverables on the European and Euro-Atlantic integration path.

In the context of strategic patience, the awareness on the role of NATO and also on the EU in the development processes and strengthening the security of the region, as well as on the concrete benefits of the various cooperation programs, is vital. NATO's crucial role in promoting security and stability in the countries of the Black Sea region should be better promoted. One of the keys to effective communication could be targeted messaging on specific practical tools which not only enhance defense capabilities and assist the process of preparations for membership but also represent an effective deterrent against the security challenges that Georgia faces today.

How can Georgia Join NATO?

Euro-Atlantic integration is a dynamic, performance-based process. Georgia has long learned that a clear focus on a results-oriented approach is the best way to deliver concrete results. In this regard, the December 2015 Foreign Ministerial statement on the open door policy was a significant development for Georgia. Firstly, Georgia's aspirant status was officially sealed and its case moved from NATO's partnership context to the 'open door policy basket.' Secondly, the allies stated that "Georgia's relationship with the Alliance contains all of the practical tools to prepare it for eventual membership."²⁴ Georgia has already successfully implemented eight cycles of the Annual National Program (ANP) which is the only practical tool to prepare MAP countries for membership. The document is a comprehensive guide to Georgia's reform agenda in the main areas of statecraft. It is important to note that all annual assessment documents of the ANP are overly positive and mostly praise Georgia for its achievement in fulfilling the preset reform objectives. Thus, MAP for Georgia became an extension of the political decision on the invitation rather than another set of practical commitments.

Furthermore, Georgia is the only aspirant country to have two additional integration mechanisms: NATO-Georgia Commission (NGC) and the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP). The NGC is a special tool for political dialogue which was established after the 2008 Russian aggression in Georgia with the aim to supervise the process set at hand in Bucharest. In Warsaw, the Alliance made it clear that it stands ready to continue mobilizing resources needed for the successful implementation of the SNGP which aims at enhancing Georgia's defense capabilities and helps Georgia advance in its preparations towards membership in the Alliance. The Allies further intensified the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package effectively running 15 parallel projects at a time as well as pledged more Allied engagement in Package implementation. At this point, it is extremely important that Georgia continue to use these tools as well as bilateral military cooperation with the key allies in order to build defence capabilities and resilience to boost the readiness of GAF to adequately respond to all threats and challenges to Euro-Atlantic security.

Thus, the recipe for opening the window of opportunity seems to be real investments in serious defense capabilities and consistent focus on the reform agenda spiced up with favorable geopolitical developments. As for the geopolitical influences, it is very important to keep up Georgia's progress

on its European integration path and make full use of the Association Agreement, the advantages of the DCFTA and visa liberalization for the benefit of the Georgian people. Visa-free entry to the Schengen zone for Georgian citizens, granted in the midst of the immigration crisis in Europe, is a clear demonstration of political support. It is also proof that persistent and continuous efforts always pay off with much depending on Georgia itself. Nonetheless, there are some experts who attach extraordinary importance to big geopolitical games and conspiracy theories. This line of thinking is mostly supported by the accession cases of the Baltic States. It is true that before 9/11, which caused the so-called geopolitical 'big bang,' membership of post-Soviet states in NATO was hardly realistic even for the most optimistic globalists. Another aspect of the case is that post-Soviet Russia, despite its fierce opposition, was too weak to prevent NATO enlargement eastward.

While there is little doubt about the credibility of the above arguments, it is still not easy to relate Georgia's strategic patience to the Baltic case. It is less than clear what kind of realistic geopolitical scenarios could precipitate the opening of the window of opportunity. A big question is what needs to change for getting to more favorable conditions for Georgia's membership. There is only one key factor that will probably not change in the foreseeable future – the elephant in the room – Russia. Russia's national interests will always be inherently contradictory with those of Georgia and its key allies; Russia will always aggressively oppose Georgia's membership in NATO. At the same time, Russia will remain a nuclear power ready to aggressively protect its national interest. A very important geopolitical change, however, is that the outlines of the new US foreign policy suggest that Russia is no longer the only power which is willing and able to act to protect its interests. Consequently, Russia will have to restrain its belligerent aggression and its readiness to escalate relations with the West can no longer be used to its strategic advantage.

Against this background, in Georgia's case, strategic patience can be simply translated as effectively using all practical tools to prepare for membership. Georgia's key task at this point is to facilitate and prepare the grounds for the political decision on the invitation to join the Alliance. Nonetheless, as NATO is a precedent-driven, bureaucratic organization, it would be easier for Georgia not to be unique in so many different ways and stick to the institutionalized integration blueprint. As there are no specific preconditions for moving to the next stage of NATO integration, it is vitally

important to set up a positive, realistic NATO-Georgia agenda which will be seen as a commonly agreed roadmap among the Allies.

While delivering on the practical side of NATO-Georgia relations, it is crucially important to show progress on the political aspects of Georgia's NATO integration process. Political support combined with strategic messaging on the irreversibility of Georgia's NATO membership, the so-called 'art of the words,' is an important deterrent against Russia's aggressive policies. Conventional wisdom proves that the only way to counter the Russian threat is a position of strength and clarity instead of strategic ambiguity. It has to be clear that NATO membership is not about technical or legal details, as proved by Montenegro's accession, but about taking sides and strengthening value-based alliances. NATO is about the strategic vision of Europe whole, free and at peace in the first place and Georgia has proven that it deserves to be a part of that club. Hence, Georgia's NATO membership might be a 'bold decisions away' or it can become hostage of an indefinite bureaucratic debate.

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