



საგარეო საკითხებისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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**A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ARMENIAN AND
GEORGIAN RELATIONS WITH NATO**

EUGENE KOGAN

EXPERT OPINION



2015



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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Editor: Jeffrey Morski
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Key Points

- We need to remember that Armenian relations with NATO are based on a clearly articulated understanding that Armenia declare stronger links with NATO (falling short of membership) while NATO membership in the case of Georgia was and still is the **cornerstone** of Georgian foreign and security policy.
- At the same time, Armenia's Individual Partnership Action Plan envisages not only greater Armenian involvement in international peace-keeping operations but also sweeping defence reforms that would bring the Armenian armed forces into greater conformity with NATO standards even **without formally adopting these standards**.
- The acceptance of the Armenian military establishment that the country is not joining the Alliance left the Alliance with room for manoeuvre to create special relations with Armenia without aggravating relations between Armenia and Russia. Thus far, this formula has proven to be successful but there is no guarantee that this formula can be maintained for the long run. Russia has not **yet** decided whether or not relations between Armenia and NATO should continue or if they should be kept to a minimum.
- In the case of Georgia, NATO's Open Door Policy has thus far failed to bring Georgia into the Alliance as a result of the Alliance's very ambiguous and cautious stand versus Russia. Although Western politicians and diplomats reiterate that Russia has no veto right on Georgia's desire to join NATO, thus far Russia was and still is the implicit veto holder.
- Finally, it is possible to say that the two countries view each other's relations with NATO differently. Namely, the Armenian defence establishment sees Georgia's relations with NATO as the country's strategic choice; however, with a fairly small chance for Georgia to become a full member of NATO. On the other hand, the Georgian defence establishment sees relations between Armenia and NATO as a minor counterweight to relations between Armenia and Russia. The Armenian defence establishment is well-aware of its limitations when it comes to its relations with NATO. As a result, NATO appreciates what Armenia does for the Alliance but without NATO's commitment to bringing Armenia into the Alliance anytime soon. The Georgian defence establishment sees its relations with NATO as a case that NATO **must** anchor

Georgia in the Alliance. The emphasis on and the importance of relations for Armenia and Georgia with NATO are not only divergent but stark. In other words, it can be said that the two countries have very different relations with NATO.

Armenian-NATO Relations: A Special Relation or Not?

Interestingly enough, the issue of Armenian-NATO relations compared with that of Georgian-NATO relations is not well researched. Why is that? The Armenian government may not be interested in attracting too much attention to itself since it needs to consider the reaction from Russia. And NATO may be not interested in highlighting relations with a country with which Turkey, as a NATO member state, has no diplomatic relations. However, there may also be a lack of genuine interest in addressing the issue. As a result, the available information is a bit outdated and, according to Ara Tadevosyan, Head of the Information Centre on NATO in Armenia: "Since the publication of the book, *Armenia-NATO, 10 Years of Progress, 1998-2008*, no new book has been published."¹ Therefore, the author treats Armenian-NATO relations with the utmost care.

It needs to be remembered that even though Armenia's official national security and military doctrine declares strong links with NATO, it **excludes** membership in the Alliance. President Robert Kocharian, who visited Slovenia in November 2005, one of the new NATO members, stated in an interview with the local *Delo* newspaper: "We do not speak about membership in NATO and we do not set such a task."² Whether or not membership in the Alliance would be considered at any future point in time remains unknown at the moment. There is no sense in speculating about this point. What is clear, however, is that as was stated by Serzh Sargsyan, the former Minister of Defence: "Armenia does not aim at changing its strategy and adopting NATO standards. When we speak about NATO standards, we mean adopting the relevant ideology, types of weapons, armament, etc."³

Despite what was said above, Armenia has been developing its broader ties with NATO under the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) launched in 2005. The document envisages not only greater Armenian involvement in international peacekeeping operations but also sweeping defence reforms that would bring the Armenian armed forces into greater conformity with NATO standards. According to a revised version of IPAP publicised in 2010, the Armenian authorities will ensure "maximum transparency" in defence

planning and budgeting and an “adequate mix” of civilian and military personnel within the Ministry of Defence. They are also due to reform the military’s chain of command and control procedures. A team of officials from NATO’s Defence Policy and Planning Division visited Yerevan in April 2011 for a regular review of IPAP-related actions taken by President Serzh Sargsyan’s government. In a statement issued on 8 April the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that the team noted further progress in the implementation of the co-operation framework.⁴ The issued statement of the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was not further elaborated.

Despite Armenia’s ties with NATO, Armenia’s official national security and military doctrine adopted in 2007 makes it clear that military ties with Russia – both on a bilateral basis and within the framework of the Russian-led CSTO – will remain *the bedrock* [author’s italics] of the Armenian defence strategy.

The so-called “complementary” policy and, in particular, the Armenian military presence in Afghanistan hardly sit well with a Russian government jealous about perceived Western inroads into what it regards as Russia’s zone of influence. Still, Moscow has never publicly faulted Yerevan, suggesting that *it does not yet consider* [author’s italics] the growing Armenia-NATO ties as a cause for serious concern. According to Anatoly Tsyganok, a Russian defence analyst, the Kremlin “does not quite like” them but at the same time “understands the difficult situation Armenia is in. Russia will not insist that the Armenian armed forces stop co-operating with NATO.”⁵ At the same time, as Mehmet Oguzhan Tulun from the Avrasya Incelemeleri Merkezi (AVIM or Centre for Eurasian Studies) says: “Armenia’s ability to court CSTO and NATO, and EEU and EU all at the same time with impunity, is *perplexing* [author’s italics]. Unlike many other countries, Armenia seems to be able to get away with maintaining paradoxical relations and neither the US (or any other NATO member for that matter) nor Russia seem to care that the country they are collaborating with is actively undermining their interests.”⁶ This is undoubtedly a *perplexing* case. Perhaps this perplexing case can be named Special Relations or Relations with a Special Touch since all organisations involved accept a special case for Armenia.

In some circles of the Armenian military establishment, the Armenian model of interaction with both CSTO and NATO is considered as a bridge between these two political-military structures. However, it should be acknowledged that in the current security situation, Armenia has few

choices: It should have a relationship of strategic co-operation with Russia as one of its main security guarantors. In the meantime, Armenia is developing a stable partnership with NATO even without entertaining *any* [author's italics] visible aspiration for membership. In this regard, there is a complete mutual understanding between Armenia and NATO⁷ and, as was abovementioned, Russia's understanding of Armenia's difficult situation.

In a manner of speaking, Russia gave, and is continuing to give, a certain leeway to the Armenian Ministry of Defence and the armed forces in their co-operation with NATO. However, it remains unknown at the moment what will happen if and when Russia will insist or, rather, demand that the Armenian armed forces stop co-operating with NATO and what will be the reaction of the Armenian Ministry of Defence. Even though Tsyganok states that "Russia will not insist," we cannot take Tsyganok's assertion for granted (see note 13 for a further explanation). As a result, such a possibility needs to be carefully assessed by the Armenian Ministry of Defence.

Back in late May 2011, the Armenian government decided to triple the number of its troops stationed in Afghanistan under the German Command. The decision to triple the Armenian peacekeeping contingent in Afghanistan is a further indication that Armenia is *continuing to seek* [author's italics] closer security ties with the West despite extending and enhancing its military alliance with Russia in 2010. Armenian leaders seem confident that they can maintain this delicate balancing act which has been a key element of Armenia's foreign policy.

By enhancing its military commitments in Afghanistan, Yerevan is signalling that the new defence agreement with Moscow *will not hold it back* [author's italics] from seeking closer military co-operation with Western powers which has deepened significantly over the past decade. Armenia participated in the US-led occupation force in Iraq with a small army contingent and, currently, has about 80 soldiers serving in Kosovo under NATO command.⁸ Davit Tonoyan, First Deputy Minister of Defence, told the *Mediamax* news agency: "We have informed NATO and our main ISAF partner Germany that a political decision has been made and Armenia has the capacity to continue assisting in stabilisation efforts in Afghanistan after the end of the ISAF mission in December" [2014].⁹

The German newspaper *Der Spiegel* originally reported NATO's plans which then were largely confirmed by James Appathurai, NATO's Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia, in an interview with *Ra-*

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. NATO's plans include boosting training with all three countries [namely Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, author's comment], increasing the interoperability of the countries' militaries with NATO. However, Appathurai, in his *RFE/RL* interview, emphasised that none of the three countries involved in this plan had *any* [author's italics] perspective for joining NATO.

In the words of Sergey Minasyan, Deputy Director of the Yerevan-based Caucasus Institute: "Armenia's government *appreciates* [author's italics] its co-operation with NATO both as a balance against Russia and as a way to improve its armed forces, but it is *sceptical* [author's italics] that the co-operation will amount to much. After the Ukrainian events Armenia should be worried that closer co-operation with NATO would anger Russia, especially if the West-East tensions continue. At least in the South Caucasus, the West, including NATO, is too far while the 'angry Russians' are already here. If Brussels thinks it can offer Armenia something more serious [and tangible, author's comment] as a real addition to the current level of security co-operation, that would be very welcomed by Yerevan, but it seems too unrealistic from here."¹⁰ That is undoubtedly a sober assessment of what NATO can and cannot do in the South Caucasus region.

On the other hand, NATO values Armenia's contribution to the Alliance's peacekeeping operations around the world which include Armenian military deployments to NATO missions in Kosovo and Afghanistan. Furthermore, Armenia is actively engaged in the Alliance's Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme, the PfP Planning and Review Process (PARP) and the Partnership Action Plan against Terrorism.

In addition, NATO, specifically, plays an important role in improving and reforming the Armenian armed forces through military education and training exercises.¹¹ For instance, as recent as early April 2015, an Armenian army platoon of 36 soldiers joined thousands of soldiers from NATO member states, including *Turkey* [author's italics], in conducting the Saber Junction 15 exercises organised by the US Army in Europe.¹² Although Yerevan stressed practical co-operation and its contribution to various NATO missions, it kept a certain distance from the intensive political dialogue that is a constituent part of IPAP.

Armenia's current [foreign, author's comment] policy is consistent with Russia's interests which is something NATO could not afford to ignore and requires a review of NATO's relations with Armenia in light of the mounting

stand-off between the West and Russia. Amid NATO's gradually toughening stance vis-à-vis Russia's belligerent policy, Armenia has taken a set of political steps which were at odds with NATO policy; most blatantly, by voting against the UN resolution declaring Crimea's referendum on joining Russia invalid and, hence, for legitimating Russia's occupation, along with a few non-democratic states. As a result, Armenia can no longer be considered a prospective political partner of NATO despite ongoing practical co-operation. In its efforts to reverse Armenia's relations with NATO, Moscow may finally compel Armenia's Ministry of Defence to suspend its IPAP and PfP programmes with NATO.¹³ Despite Eduard Abrahamyan's call for NATO to review its relations Armenia, NATO is very unlikely to review its relations with the country as a result of the effort that NATO invested in maintaining what the author calls Special Relations.

To conclude, it can be said that relations between Armenia and NATO can indeed be called Special Relations. For the time being, maintaining the delicate balancing act between NATO and Russia proved to be not just 'mission possible' but also 'mission successful.' This is without any doubts a great accomplishment for the skilful navigation of the Armenian Ministry of Defence. However, the Armenian ministry needs to remember that Moscow can change its mind concerning Armenian-NATO military co-operation at any time suitable for Moscow. Ministry officials cannot take the consent of Russia for granted under any circumstances and, as a result, are required to remain watchful. The West at large is unlikely to react forcefully to Russia's demands and Russia is fully aware of this crucial fact.

Georgian-NATO Relations: Georgia's Misreading of NATO?

Georgian-NATO relations in Georgia have been analysed from almost every vantage point excluding, however, NATO's ambivalent attitude towards Georgia and the Georgian path towards NATO. There is a clear understanding in Georgia that Georgia should be admitted into NATO. The defence reform that Georgia pursued and continues to pursue and its contribution to the Alliance's operations in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan are the clear indicators that Georgia deserves it. On the other hand, NATO is weary of admitting Georgia even though NATO officials repeatedly state that NATO's Open Door Policy remains in place.

Independent experts regarded Tbilisi's wishes to receive MAP during the last NATO Summit in Wales back in September 2014 as justified but doubt-

ed that they were realistic. Security expert, Teona Akuburdia, told the Jamestown Foundation that: “The primary opponents of giving Georgia the ‘road map for accession to the Alliance’ were not the US, but France and Germany.” She did not rule out, however, that against the backdrop of events in Crimea, “even these countries could change their position and support Georgia.”¹⁴

President Barack Obama told a news conference after meeting European Union (EU) leaders in Brussels on 26 March 2014 that: “Neither Ukraine nor Georgia are currently on a path to NATO membership and there is no prospect of that changing anytime soon.”¹⁵ The meaning “of that changing anytime soon” leaves Georgia empty handed, very frustrated and deeply disappointed. In other words, not just France and Germany continue to oppose giving Georgia the ‘road map for accession’ but Obama’s statement was the last straw that destroyed any illusions harboured by the Georgian government. Furthermore, Obama’s statement provided Moscow with ammunition to state clearly and unequivocally: “Georgia, NATO will not let you in within the foreseeable future. Look what has happened to your efforts to join NATO since early 2000. Thus far, it ended without prospect even though 31 Georgian soldiers died in Afghanistan.”

From the Bitter Pill to the Bitter Reality

The View from Georgia

Even though Georgia remains an aspirant for NATO membership, the process of finally joining the Alliance has been suspended. Almost one year after Obama’s statement, in March 2015, Georgia was shocked again when President Francois Hollande said unambiguously that: “France currently opposes admission of any new [NATO] members.” Hollande’s statement reinforced scepticism in Georgia over its NATO membership.¹⁶

Although Georgian politicians are doing their best to maintain a cheerful demeanour, the reality is a bit different. Mindia Janelidze, former Minister of Defence, when asked about Georgia’s expectations from the next NATO Summit in Warsaw in July 2016, said that it was too early to speak about the specifics but consultations were already ongoing to receive “tangible results” from next year’s summit. Janelidze said that: “Of course, we are already preparing for the Warsaw Summit. We are preparing the Ministry of Defence’s proposals but this issue goes beyond just the Ministry of De-

fence [competence] and these proposals will finally be outlined as a result of consultations with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the government. But we are already thinking about it and we have already launched consultations on this issue with some of our partners in order to get tangible results from the Warsaw Summit.”¹⁷

The big question remains what if tangible results are not achieved? Then what?

Addressing delegates at a NATO Parliamentary Assembly session in Budapest on 18 May, Davit Usupashvili, Speaker of the Georgian Parliament, said that NATO should either give MAP to Georgia or declare that MAP is no longer a precursor to an eventual *full membership* [author’s italics]. Speaking at the same event, Alexander Vershbow, NATO Deputy Secretary General, said: “I cannot give any timetable for when the open door will be reached.” Usupashvili added that: “It is a crucial time that the open door policy does not become a revolving door policy where aspirant countries are stuck in a rotation. In 2014, we heard in Wales that Georgia’s relationship with the Alliance ‘contains the tools necessary to continue moving Georgia forward towards eventual membership.’ Many in Georgia interpreted these words as Georgia being given de facto MAP. After more than 12 years of this journey I do not want these people to be disappointed with prolonged talks [on] whether or not Georgia deserves MAP. Russia must be engaged but for the Euro-Atlantic security architecture to retain its integrity, there must be deterrence”¹⁸ or, rather, deterrence capability as a back-up.

According to Davit Dondua, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs: “Even though there is little chance for MAP, Georgia is still pushing the issue intensively in its talks with NATO partners as a ‘bargaining’ tool in order to get, at least, something.”¹⁹

The View From NATO

In the words of William Lahue, NATO Liaison Officer for the Caucasus, Head of the NATO Liaison Office in Georgia: “Georgia, due to its special partner status with NATO, would continue to have additional tools to strengthen its relationship with NATO which the other regional partners [read Armenia and Azerbaijan, author’s comment] do not have. Through the NATO-Georgia Commission (NGC), Georgia has a unique forum through which to

continue to enhance its military and political *connectivity* [author's italics] to NATO. Georgia is also supported by the allies through the Professional Development Programme which provides capacity-building for the development of professional skills for the civil service in the defence and security sectors."²⁰

Even though the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Centre (JTEC) was inaugurated on 27 August 2015 and Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary General, said that: "NATO will be more present in Georgia and we will be more visible in Georgia" [this fact alone has not moved Georgia even an inch towards NATO membership, author's comment]. Stoltenberg further added that: "With the inauguration of the JTEC, our *co-operation* [author's italics] with Georgia will grow deeper."²¹ Co-operation yes, however, MAP is not on the cards (see also Appathurai's statement mentioned in note 10).

In spite of the fact that the new Georgian government [that came to power on 2 October 2012, author's comment] clearly announced and confirmed that membership in NATO and the EU remain priorities, the US and other NATO and EU member states are becoming, in discussions on this issue, less enthusiastic. Thus, it is possible to state that the period of intensive lobbying for Georgia's NATO membership is over.²²

To augment the last point, many members of NATO believe it has much more to lose from Georgia being a member than it has to gain. The current tone from the Georgian government is strangely impatient and aggressive towards NATO as if NATO owes Georgia quick membership or MAP or something. This is dangerous. It is not a good idea because it sets itself up to fail if the government cannot deliver something that was *never* [author's italics] promised anyway. It gives the impression to the Georgian public that NATO is somehow not engaged with Georgia unless this or that happens, which is not true.²³

To conclude, despite the Georgian government's relentless push for getting the country MAP, it can be stated clearly and unequivocally that Georgia will not get MAP anytime soon. The author does not think that not granting MAP to Georgia comes as a disappointment to Georgians. The never-ending discussion on MAP that began at the Bucharest Summit in 2008 and still goes on and NATO's very ambiguous position on the issue prepared Georgians to accept an almost inevitable result of 'no.' There is

no doubt that by not getting MAP, Georgian-NATO relations remain difficult for a long time. The lack of an alternative option or a Plan B for Georgia not only severely damages relations between Georgia and NATO but also provides Russia and Russian sympathisers in Georgia with ammunition to say that: “We informed you Georgians all along that NATO was not ready to bring you in. You in Georgia never believed in such an outcome and clung to the hope that the indecisive Alliance would maintain its promise made at the Bucharest Summit back in 2008. Well, face the fact.”

It is easier to blame NATO for ambiguity, indecisiveness and shirking from its pledge and responsibility rather than to admitting Georgia’s unrealistic expectations. The Georgian leadership misperceived as well as misread NATO’s road signs that said:

- a) NATO is not willing to aggravate relations with Russia for the sake of Georgia
- b) NATO is not ready to defend Georgia militarily in the case of a new conflict breaking out between Georgia and Russia
- c) Even if we assume that Georgia is admitted to the Alliance, NATO will be in no position to defend Georgia because, to paraphrase Minasyan’s statement, “the angry Russians are already here, while NATO is too far” (see note 10) or far-away. Turkey, as the closest NATO member state to Georgia, will be reluctant to initiate hostile activity against Russia without the full back up of NATO to defend the interests of a “new member,” Georgia. And the way that the NATO decision-making process is done does not augur well for its “new member,” Georgia.

Compared with the pragmatic, sober and clearly defined relations between Armenia and NATO, Georgian-NATO relations were and still are of a different nature. They exposed Georgia’s vulnerability and, at the same time, Georgia’s steadfastness to reach its destination; namely, NATO membership. At the same time, the Georgian leadership was not and is not yet ready to accept the harsh reality that the country’s steadfastness and sacrifices in Afghanistan have not been translated into membership. In the end, acrimony and recriminations may fly in the air but they do not help Georgia under the current difficult circumstances.

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