

Georgia and the United States: From Obama to Trump

Benjamin Cooper

Introduction

In 2003 during the Rose Revolution, the Republic of Georgia became a democracy. Pro-democracy rioters kicked out Soviet holdover Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikheil Saakashvili was elected. Saakashvili was a true ally to the West, and he was a trusted leader in Washington. He looked to bring Georgia out of the Russian sphere of influence and to bring Western money into Tbilisi. After George W. Bush's landmark speech in Tbilisi in 2005, the first by a U.S. president in Georgia, the prospects for the Georgian democracy movement were high. Yet, as U.S. foreign policy shifted to the Obama Administration's "Russia Reset", Georgian-U.S. relations hit a stall. While the practical nature and symbolism of the alliance remained the same, the rhetoric and intensity of U.S. support for Georgia declined. While the Obama administration did improve economic ties with Georgia after Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014, the Trump administration drastically changed its policy towards Tbilisi and have improved relations with the Georgian Dream government. The prospects of an expanded partnership between Tbilisi and Washington remain strong and by providing new military and economic support to Georgia, the Trump administration has shown the Georgian people its willingness to work towards Georgian integration into the NATO alliance.

What Obama Inherited?

In August 2008, after repeated incursions by Russian 'humanitarian' forces into the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili sent troops to respond. After a daylong attempt by the Georgians to seize the Gupta bridge, Russia responded with an overwhelming force that pushed Russian forces into Georgia proper. The Russian forces occupied the historical city of Gori, the birthplace of Joseph Stalin, and the Port of Poti on the Black Sea.¹ These aggressive Russian actions were compounded by the bombing of parts of Tbilisi and a cyberattack on Georgian technological infrastructure.

President George W. Bush responded by airlifting Georgian troops home from Afghanistan so they could fight for their country. Within weeks of the August 12 ceasefire, Bush agreed to send \$1 billion in aid to Georgia, anchor a U.S. warship off of Georgia in the Black Sea, and place sanctions on the Russian government.²³ Whether this response was adequate to combat the seriousness of the Russian invasion and if the response was what cause the Russians to scale back their invasion is still debated.

¹ (CNN Library)

² (Pan and Bahrapour, U.S. Warship Ancours Off Georgia)

³ (Myers)

The aid package provided to Georgia was generous. It increased aid from \$63 million to \$570 million in FY 2009. The remaining \$430 million was provided in the following years. However, the aid did not focus on providing military resources. Instead it focused on rebuilding Georgia's infrastructure as well as solving the more immediate issue of feeding and sheltering the thousands of displaced Georgians as a result the war. Bush's reluctance to sell weapons and equipment to Georgia was an additional precedent which the Obama administration would fail to break in the coming years.

Obama's Policy

In a 2008 presidential debate with John McCain, then Senator Obama asserted that he believed Georgia should be immediately provided with a Membership Action Plan (MAP). He claimed he supported both Georgian and Ukrainian ascension into NATO. Yet in the same debate, Senator Obama stated he wanted to find areas of common ground with the Russian Federation to work on issues such as nuclear proliferation.⁴ Because of this desire to engage Russia on economic and military issues, many in the Georgian government and public believed John McCain would better suit their interests in Washington. Yet, the Obama administration was worse than expected for many Georgians.⁵

Only a year and a half after stating his support for Georgian NATO membership during the debate, President Obama abandoned the Bush-era plan of sending missile-defense systems to the Eastern part of the NATO alliance in Poland and the Czech Republic. While Obama claimed the abandonment of the missile defense program in Eastern Europe was due to Iran's short-range missiles being a greater threat to NATO, the Kremlin viewed it as President Obama kowtowing to their demands.⁶ Likewise, Georgians felt Obama was letting Russia off the hook for their 2008 invasion of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The Russia Reset in March 2009, which resulted in the abandonment of the missile defense system mentioned above, was the beginning of the Obama administration's initiative to make peace with the Kremlin. Beyond the missile defense system, the Obama administration sought to cooperate on issues of common ground, promote democracy in Russia, and increase U.S.-Russian economic relations. Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin negotiated the new START treaty in 2010 in Prague which made considerable progress in cutting the deployed nuclear weapons of the U.S. and Russia.⁷ It was a signal to the rest of the world of the supposed close relationship between the former adversaries. President Obama also lifted the sanctions the Bush Administration had imposed on Russia after the invasion of Georgia in 2008 and began cooperation on a nuclear deal with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The U.S. and Russia also agreed to some military cooperation and the Kremlin granted the U.S. access to Russian airspace to aid its war in Afghanistan. Vice President Biden even spoke of increased support by the U.S. for Russian membership in the Council of Europe and the WTO.⁸

While these new agreements were an initial success for Obama's 'Russia Reset', Georgians felt abandoned. In particular, the agreement to lift the sanctions on Russia, which

⁴ (The Daily Conversation)

⁵ (Batashvili)

⁶ (Dilanian)

⁷ (Lee)

⁸ (The Office of the Vice President)

were imposed after their invasion of Georgia in 2008, was extremely worrisome for many Georgians. They felt Obama let Russia off the hook for an open act of war and a clear violation of international law.

Georgian Reaction

The reaction of the Georgian public to the Russia Reset was understandably negative. For one, Georgia was the largest per-capita contributor to the NATO ISAF forces in Afghanistan. Georgians died for an American cause. Yet, they received nothing in return. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton toured Georgia in 2010 and reassured the pro-U.S. Georgian government that the Obama administration would not abandon them as they improved relations with Russia. While this symbolic rhetoric was impactful, it did not help to solve the practical issue of Russian troops becoming entrenched in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the disputed territories claimed and occupied by Russian troops.^{9,10} Clinton's speech also never showed any intention on the part of the U.S. to reinstate sanctions due to Russia's invasion into Georgia.

The U.S. simply continued to play both sides of the Georgian issue. On one hand, Clinton honored the U.S. commitment to a cease-fire with the Russians and claimed to be maintaining pressure on Russia to withdraw from the occupied territories. On the other hand, President Obama made little effort in creating a relationship with Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili.¹¹

The Georgian people felt betrayed by Obama's Russia Reset policy. As mentioned, Georgian's shed substantial blood in fighting for the Americans. Obama seemed ignorant to this fact. Obama's unwillingness to sell Javelin missiles to Georgia also put the government in a demanding situation. Turning away from the West was not an option and Georgia was forced to deal with Obama's reluctance to send arms to assist their military and his lifting of sanctions against Russia simply because any alternative would have resulted in a worsening of relations with Washington. Georgians would have also seen these alternatives as a reversion on the values and ideals with which their newly formed democracy was founded on.

How Georgians Dealt with Obama

Saakashvili's government accepted the Obama administration's Russia Reset and worked diligently to downplay Washington's ignorance of Georgian issues. President Saakashvili said in an interview with BBC News that U.S.-Georgian relations were 'at a high'.¹² By using the hand dealt to him, Saakashvili encouraged the Georgian government to continue reforms with the goal of NATO membership. He continued sending troops to Afghanistan and Iraq as part of ISAF which rewarded Saakashvili with an in-person visit with President Obama at the Oval Office in 2012. Saakashvili also continued building up Georgia's institutions to further promote the democratic process and the pro-western stance of his government. He rid the Georgian police of

⁹ (Sheridan)

¹⁰ (Badridze)

¹¹ (Sheridan)

¹² (BBC News)

corruption, simplified the tax code, and ensured honest dealings in Georgia's energy sector.¹³ These acts of reform successfully displayed Georgia's desire to join NATO and rid itself of its corrupt Soviet past despite persistent objections from member states due to the country's ongoing conflict with Russia.

Despite Saakashvili's institutional improvements and willingness to move towards a more democratic system, Georgians still felt abandoned by Obama's actions during the Russian reset.¹⁴ The Georgian government had no choice but to claim relations with the U.S. were 'at a high' as Saakashvili said in 2012. Yet, many Georgians were privately upset and disappointed in the lack of cooperation during the President Obama's first term in office.

The frustration continued in Georgia after the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014.¹⁵ It was clear the Russian reset had failed and President Obama's unwillingness to support Georgia with Javelins and other military assistance out of fear it would provoke Russia was all for naught. However, Obama never renege on these policies.

When the Georgian Dream party came to power in 2013, they encouraged more engagement with Russia and took on a soft-power initiative to keep Russia at bay. Georgian Dream began trading with Russia and opened Georgia as a visa-free travel zone for Russian citizens. Despite this policy of renewing some relations with Russia, Georgian Dream continued to align Georgia's interests with the West.

After Crimea, fear spread throughout Georgia that Tbilisi was next.¹⁶ In response, U.S. Army and Georgian soldiers participated in the Noble Partner exercise in May 2015. This show of force helped reassure Georgians of Washington's commitment to the democratic process in Tbilisi despite Russia's aggressive actions against its neighbors.¹⁷

While Noble Partner was a step in the right direction for the U.S.-Georgian strategic partnership, the Obama administration never capitulated Georgia's request for Javelin missiles. Furthermore, President Obama famously said in March 2014, only a month after the annexation of Crimea by Russia, that Georgia was "not on the track for NATO membership."¹⁸ The Obama administration's unwillingness to give in to Georgian requests ensured the relationship between Washington and Tbilisi could only go so far. A new administration in Washington was the only course of action which would take the strategic partnership to the next level and adamantly demonstrate the U.S. commitment to Georgia's NATO ambitions.

Georgia and Trump

From the beginning, the Trump administration has been more willing to increase the strategic cooperation between the U.S. and Georgia. In November 2017, the U.S. State Department approved the sale of the Javelin missile system to Georgia. Georgia had been asking to acquire these weapons since the end of the Georgian-Russian war in August 2008.¹⁹ The Georgian Defense Readiness Program, established in June 2018, shifted the focus of the Georgian Army's training from support of U.S. forces to territorial defense. This shift in training

¹³ (Caryl)

¹⁴ (Badridze)

¹⁵ (Badridze)

¹⁶ (Cormaic)

¹⁷ (U.S. Army Europe Public Affairs)

¹⁸ (Civil Georgia)

¹⁹ (Ministry)

style will help better prepare the Georgian Army for a possible Russian invasion. According to the Georgian Foreign Ministry, Trump has also established extensive contacts at all levels of the Georgian government and combined with Vice President Mike Pence's visit to Tbilisi in July 2017, the U.S. government has made extensive headway in continuing to grow the U.S.-Georgian strategic partnership.²⁰

Outside of military cooperation, the U.S. House of Representatives approved a \$1.3 trillion-dollar spending bill in March 2018 which included a clause prohibiting the financing of governments recognizing the independence of Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.²¹ This act, although mostly rhetoric rather than action, demonstrated the support Tbilisi has in all branches of the U.S. government.

Georgia also hopes that with U.S. support and a continued soft-power policy towards Russia, they can reach an ascension agreement with NATO. The purpose of this soft-power policy towards Russia is to normalize relations without breaking sovereignty. The soft power policy will show off Georgia's beauty to Russian citizens who drink Georgian wine and enjoy weekends on the Black Sea. The Georgian government believes this engagement on a civic and economic level will help Georgia become a member of NATO because the relationship will show there is no potential military threat posed by Russia against Georgia.²² Russians will want to come to Georgia which will help boost the local economy and also help grow the tourism industry as a whole.

In an editorial published by The Hill in September 2018, Georgian Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze talked about Georgia's importance in the NATO alliance as a vital Black Sea nation with a close proximity to Russia. The Prime Minister also spoke of how Georgia continues to "punch above its weight" and restated Georgia's desire for full NATO membership. In October 2018, President Trump's National Security Advisor John Bolton echoed these same sentiments. He visited Tbilisi and reassured the Georgian government that Georgia is of the highest strategic importance for the U.S.²³ While these speeches are just that, speeches, the policy changes of the Trump administration do demonstrate increased cooperation and partnership between Tbilisi and Washington with the goal of full NATO membership in mind.

While the Javelin missiles, Georgian Defense Readiness Program, and actions taken by the U.S. House of Representatives are an important step to protecting Georgia's sovereignty, many believe more should be done to combat the Russian threat.²⁴ The Russian military can overwhelm the Georgian military in a head to head war but through the soft-power initiative of the Georgian government towards Russia and the increased cooperation with the U.S., Tbilisi feels they are headed in the right direction.

Conclusion: The Future of the U.S.-Georgian Partnership

While there were tense moments during the Obama administration regarding Georgia's desire to acquire Javelin missiles and to gain greater cooperation with the U.S., the relationship remained strong. The Georgian government never wavered in their support of the U.S. mission in

²⁰ (Ministry)

²¹ (Georgian Journal)

²² (Ministry)

²³ (Agenda.ge)

²⁴ (Batashvili)

Afghanistan and of their elevation of Western ideals and values. This support has continued throughout the Trump administration and there has been a substantial increase in military cooperation and communication since Trump's election.

With the recent increase in tensions between Russia and Ukraine in the Sea of Azov, there is no doubt that Russia has continued its aggressive tactics against what it perceives to be its sphere of influence. With this aggression against Ukraine and the subsequent denial by the Kremlin of any wrongdoing, the Georgian government must remain vigilant and on-alert in case of any aggressive actions from Russia.

Georgia and the U.S. should continue to participate in joint military exercises like Noble Partner and the Georgian military should seek further training and advise from its U.S. counterparts. Continuing to create a proper relationship with the Russian government and people will also give Georgia legitimacy in the international community. This relationship will make certain that Russia cannot further invade Georgia without substantial international repercussions. Finally, in terms of its relationship with the U.S., Georgia must not get complacent with the status quo. Russia never rests and Putin will continue to attempt to distract his citizens from economic hardship at home with military success abroad. An invasion into Georgia, a territory many in Russia have a connection to because of the Soviet Union, would be an accessible option for Putin's military. Working with the U.S. to further economic development, ridding the Georgian government of potential corruption, and continuing to create a military partnership with the most powerful country on earth will help ensure Russian troops do not push further into Georgian territory.

Bibliography

- Agenda.ge. *US security advisor: Georgia is of the highest strategic importance for US*. 26 October 2018. 28 December 2018. <<http://agenda.ge/en/news/2018/2230>>.
- Badridze, Giorgi. Interview. Ben Cooper. July 2018.
- Batashvili, David. Interview. Ben Cooper. June 2018.
- BBC News. *Mikheil Saakashvili: US-Georgia relations 'at a high'*. 31 January 2012. 28 December 2018. <<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-16804050/mikheil-saakashvili-us-georgia-relations-at-a-high>>.
- Caryl, Christian. *The Georgian paradox*. 31 January 2012. 28 December 2018. <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/01/31/the-georgian-paradox/>>.
- Civil Georgia. *Obama: Georgia, Ukraine 'Not on Path to NATO Membership'*. 27 March 2014. 28 December 2018. <<https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27079>>.
- CNN Library. *2008 Georgia Russia Conflict Fast Facts*. 3 April 2018. 27 December 2018. <<https://edition.cnn.com/2014/03/13/world/europe/2008-georgia-russia-conflict/index.html>>.
- Cormaic, Ruadhán Mac. *Georgia fears 'another Crimea' inside its borders*. 6 June 2016. 28 December 2018. <<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/georgia-fears-another-crimea-inside-its-borders-1.2673707>>.
- Dilanian, Ken. *Obama scraps Bush missile-defense plan*. n.d. <<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/obama-scraps-bush-missile-defense-plan/story?id=8602322>>.
- Georgian Journal. *US spending bill 2018 prohibits to fund governments that recognize independence of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region*. 24 March 2018. 28 December 2018. <<https://www.georgianjournal.ge/politics/34352-us-spending-bill-2018-prohibits-to-fund-governments-that-recognize-independence-of-abkhazia-and-tskhinvali-region.html>>.
- Lee, Jesse. *Presidnet Obama Announces the New START Treaty*. 26 March 2010. 27 December 2018. <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2010/03/26/president-obama-announces-new-start-treaty>>.
- Ministry, Representative of Georgian Foreign. Interview. Benjamin Cooper. 13 July 2018.
- Myers, Steven Lee. *White House Unveils \$1 Billion Georgia Aid Plan*. 3 September 2008. 28 December 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/04/world/europe/04cheney.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>.
- Pan, Philip P. n.d.
- Pan, Philip P. and Tara Bahrapour. *U.S. Warship Ancours Off Georgia*. 6 September 2008. 27 December 2018. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/09/05/AR2008090503322.html>>.
- Sheridan, Mary Beth. *U.S. tries to calm Georgia's fears about reset of relations with Russia*. 6 July 2010. 28 December 2018. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/05/AR2010070501211.html>>.
- The Daily Conversation. *Russia & Ukraine Discussed in 2008 Obama/McCain Debate*. 2 March 2014. Video. 27 December 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_aA82t01NGc>.
- The Office of the Vice President. *Remarks by the Vice President at the Munich Security Conference*. 7 February 2015. 27 December 2018. <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/07/remarks-vice-president-munich-security-conference>>.

U.S. Army Europe Public Affairs. *Exercise Noble Partner 2015 demonstrates bilateral cooperation*. 1 May 2015. 28 December 2018.
<https://www.army.mil/article/147688/exercise_noble_partner_2015_demonstrates_bilateral_cooperation>.