

The Temptations of Realpolitik: Georgia's Evolving Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Georgia's foreign policy has shifted significantly in the last decade. With a pro-Western position and a goal of European integration, relations with Russia have remained a focal point of its foreign policy. Western partners have become concerned about Georgia's adherence to the Western-led sanction regime and its developing ties with Russia. Georgia's policy of attempting to balance the interests of many regional countries while overtly opposing none has produced diplomatic difficulties in the country's contacts with the West. Its current foreign policy demonstrates the difficulties of employing realpolitik as a guiding paradigm in international relations. Georgia's ability to balance ties will be essential in defining the region's future and will be keenly monitored by the international community.

Key Words: Foreign Policy, Realpolitik, South Caucasus, Georgia, Russia, the West.

Introduction

Since regaining independence in 1991, Georgia has undertaken considerable changes to establish itself with a prominent international role as well as to consolidate its economy and democracy. However, the country's foreign policy has not followed a consistent pathway, with the current Georgian Dream (GD) government making foreign policy decisions that seem to have been primarily led by 'realpolitik' principles.

Georgia, as a small country sandwiched between competing and powerful regional powers, must pay attention to the relative distribution of power among its neighbours as well as the characteristics of a competitive interstate system that has historically been unfavourable to small states. The country's foreign policies are determined by a complicated regional context, the competing strategic relationship between the United States, the European Union, and Russia in the South Caucasus, and global economic factors that impact Georgia's external economic policies. However, as some scholars point out, it could be argued that the primary drivers of Georgian foreign policy during the previous twenty years (if not millennia) have been essentially domestic in nature.¹

The establishment of Georgia's foreign policy has been a tool which the country's presidents have had at their reach, with little opposing influence, either horizontally or vertically. Under such conditions, populism becomes an attractive political tool, undermining the institutionalisation of foreign policy, a framework that imposes many limitations on hasty and one-sided decision-making. Domestic concerns are a major source of influence directing Georgian foreign policy, exacerbated by the environment of economic crises and the triple challenge of country-building, state-building, and democracy-building that Georgian administrations have faced over the previous three decades. It is therefore that Georgia's foreign policy cannot be understood without considering the country's limited economic resources.²

The Southern Caucasian country's approach to pursuing new alliances has resulted in an increase in commercial partners and diplomatic ties, but it has not yet managed to distance itself completely from Russian spheres of influence. The current government's realignment with the Russian Federation has altered the regional power balance. The alignment has been

¹ Tracey German, Kornely Kakachia, and Stephen F Jones, *Georgia's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022).

² *Ibid.*, 14-15.

viewed by many as a strategic mistake that threatens the country's stability and sovereignty. Georgian society has become polarized over the Georgian Dream government's realpolitik approach towards world politics, with the belief that the nation's democratic and independent values have been abandoned in favour of economically oriented decision-making.

Despite the mid-term successes of the GD's realpolitik strategy, Georgia still faces many internal and external challenges. Georgian economy has become heavily reliant on Russia and its political system is still in transition, with some calling out the democratic backsliding of the country bolstered by the government in office.³ The GD's realpolitik foreign policy has allowed it to balance the interests of various regional powers and strengthen its economy in the last few years. However, such an approach has created diplomatic obstacles with the West and old allies, continuing to polarize Georgian society. This article aims to analyse Georgia's foreign policy since the dissolution of the USSR in the early 1990s, centring on the effects of Georgia's relationship with its Western allies since the adoption of a new foreign relations strategy that the country has been following since 2012 under the Georgian Dream government.

Georgia's Foreign Policy: An Overview

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, Georgia re-established its independence in 1991. At this point, Georgia's foreign policy was mainly centred on establishing and consolidating its new nation and forging new ties. The country intended to achieve its national interests through diversification seeking fresh allies and integration into the West.

As previously noted, Georgia's foreign policy cannot be understood outside of the framework of the country's limited economic resources and domestic instability, which sets the course of its foreign policy strategy. The country's economy was decimated in the 1990s. Georgia's seventy-year Soviet rule left its long-standing legacy, including weak infrastructure, a weak legal system, and a lack of access to international markets. To strengthen its economy, Georgians sought to implement several economic reforms; reforms which were successful in increasing economic growth but negatively impacted the country's social welfare system. At the same time, Georgia pursued to increase its presence in international organizations to further

³ Liana Fix and Coraline Kapp, "The Dangers of Democratic Backsliding in Georgia," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 21, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/article/dangers-democratic-backsliding-georgia>.

surge its influence in the international realm and by interacting with the West, and their regional neighbours: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, and, respectively, Russia.⁴

Similarly, the 1990s economic crises caused the new-born Russian Federation (on which Georgia had historically relied for food, oil, and jobs), to seek control over Georgia's domestic industry. Russia wielded significant power over Georgia throughout the 1990s, owing to the country's limited internal resources. At this time, economic resources were critical to achieving foreign policy independence from Russia, but confronted with secessionist revolts, the Georgian economy could not sustain civilian or military rule in the separatist territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Considering the situation, then-President Eduard Shevardnadze had few options but to maintain close ties with its regional hegemon and northern neighbour on the basis of mutual interests.⁵

With Georgia's economy's slow recovery by the mid-1990s, its foreign policy goal was set towards closer integration with the West, and especially, NATO. In the year 2000, the country produced a conceptual paper stressing that integration into Western institutions was a top national priority.⁶ From the period of the 1990s to 2004, Georgia's ties with the West and the United States became increasingly tight and strong. This period was distinguished by regular high-level US visits, culminating in Georgia's solidified aspirations to join NATO in 2002.

The effects of the Rose Revolution in November 2003 with a new economic strategy fostered further economic growth and granted Georgia a new image on the international stage. In October 2005 Georgia's, then-President Mikhail Saakashvili, who had just succeeded Shevardnadze, made clear that Euro-Atlantic integration was a means to achieve Georgia's top priority (restoration of territorial integrity). A Western economic model equalled national security for Saakashvili's government, such a model not only did it bring Europe in, but it also built a robust enough economy to withstand the effects of the Russian economic blockade after 2006.⁷

⁴ Tracey German, Kornely Kakachia, and Stephen F Jones, *Georgia's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022).

⁵ Korneli Kakachia et al., *Georgian Foreign Policy: The Quest for Sustainable Security* (Tbilisi Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2013): 16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 18-19

Georgia's strategy towards Russia has not been a linear one, however, despite the constant pressure from Moscow it has been set with the goal of encouraging good collaboration and mutual economic progress between the two nations. Under Saakashvili, Georgia's diplomatic relations with Russia gradually deteriorated from 2004. The constant Russian support of the separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia heavily strained relations with Russia in this period, culminating in 2008.

The 2008 Russo-Georgian War, resulted in Georgian diplomatic ties with Russia being drastically cut and Georgia tried to bolster its security by further strengthening links with its Western allies.⁸ With the two nations engaged in a five-day war back in August 2008, the conflict terminated with Russia's occupation and recognition of the independence of the de facto autonomous Republic of Abkhazia and the territory of South Ossetia, which were left under direct Russian influence.⁹

Saakashvili's strategy of "disengagement" towards Russia after the occupation of 20% of Georgian sovereign territory, was relatively short despite diplomatic tension. In 2010, flight restrictions with the Russian Federation were removed, and in 2012 visa requirements for Russian citizens were abolished.¹⁰ Despite the conflict, Russian occupation and coercion, Georgia has still attempted to preserve a cordial relationship with Russia in the hope of benefiting from economic cooperation, with both nations working to repair relations in recent years.

Georgia's Foreign Policy at the Crossroads

Georgia's foreign politics has remained formally constant during the previous five years, with the goal of European integration and the development of tighter partnerships in collaboration with NATO and the United States as the top priority.¹¹ Nevertheless, the current Georgian government, led by the Georgian Dream since the 2012 parliamentary elections, regards Russia as a vital force in the area and views its own role as a minor state that must

⁸ Tracey German, Kornely Kakachia, and Stephen F Jones, *Georgia's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

¹⁰ Alexander Atasuntsev, "How Far Will the Thaw in Russia-Georgia Relations Extend?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace., May 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89796>.

¹¹ Kornely Kakachia, "Georgian Foreign Policy Strategy in Uncertain Times," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center*, September 5, 2022: 2, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13732-georgian-foreign-policy-strategy-in-uncertain-times.html>.

accommodate the dominant regional hegemon, which also happens to be the main source of threat.¹² The current alignment of Tbilisi with Moscow has caused major concern in the West, who view the country's growing connections with Russia as a danger to regional peace and security, given the current geopolitical situation.

From the time when the GD government entered office, efforts to normalise relations with Russia were reinstated in the agenda. As a result, Georgia has grown extremely reliant on Russian imports and exports. Russia's position in many important areas of the Georgian economy has expanded, with its peak reaching after the outbreak of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.¹³ Despite complaints from Georgian officials and international observers, direct flights between Moscow and Georgia were reintroduced this year after the four-year ban imposed by Russian President Vladimir Putin in light of the protests in the South Caucasus region, with the European Union having expressed worry over Georgia's 'EU path' after this decision.¹⁴ The flight reestablishment has been seen as a betrayal in favour of Russian interests, hence strengthening Russian dominance in the Southern Caucasus.

From the perspective of Russia, the economic link was always a prelude to drawing Georgia into Russia's political circle, and in some way, it has succeeded.¹⁵ It is noteworthy that Georgia has previously professed support for economic sanctions against Moscow and has even approved resolutions in support of them, especially after the events of the 2014 military aggression on Ukraine. Nevertheless, under the current geopolitical context, some have criticised the government for failing to properly enforce new packages of sanctions while moving Georgia away from democratic norms and EU principles.

Instead, the Georgian economy has continued to deal with sanctioned Russia and has not taken steps to limit Russian involvement in critical industries such as banking, tourism, and real estate. In fact, both countries' trade has increased since the year since Moscow launched

¹² Kornely Kakachia, "Georgian Foreign Policy Strategy in Uncertain Times," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center*, September 5, 2022: 4, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13732-georgian-foreign-policy-strategy-in-uncertain-times.html>.

¹³ "Georgia's Economic Dependence on Russia: Trade, Tourism, Remittances, and Russian Companies in Georgia," Transparency International Georgia, March 10, 2022, <https://transparency.ge/en/post/georgias-economic-dependence-russia-trade-tourism-remittances-and-russian-companies-georgia>.

¹⁴ RFE/RL's Echo of the Caucasus, "Georgian Airways Announces Controversial Plan for Transit Flights for Russians via Tbilisi," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, May 25, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-airways-russia-transit-flights/32427876.html>.

¹⁵ Kornely Kakachia Lebanidze Bidzina, "Georgian Dream Meets Georgia's Nightmare," *Foreign Policy*, June 25, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/25/georgian-dream-meets-georgias-nightmare/?fbclid=IwAR3DtijJPoPJQooRyOYyS2L7v97wsEy53AU5IU8kkYmRb%E2%80%A6>.

its all-out assault on Ukraine; Georgia's exports towards Russia increased by 6.8 %, while imports from Russia to the country amounted to a 79 % increase just in 2022.¹⁶

Furthermore, Georgia's administration has been chastised for failing to take a more forceful position against Russia's activities in Ukrainian sovereign territory, deteriorating relations with long-term allies in the West and Eastern Europe.¹⁷ Some argue that the country's reliance on Russian imports and transit routes and its desire for normalised ties with its northern neighbour has made it wary of completely committing to the current Western-led sanctions regime.¹⁸ Of particular interest are the stances made by GD supporters, who have publicly accused the West of wanting to drag Georgia into the Ukraine conflict. Instead of siding with the West and the international rules-based system, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili has made the case that one of the key causes for the ongoing conflict in Ukrainian territory has been NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe and Ukraine's ambition to join.¹⁹ The statements follow the Russian victimhood narrative of an unfounded military aggression to a sovereign nation in an attempt by the GD government to continue to push the cuddly relations with Russia.

Georgia's most important allies, notably Europe and the United States, are concerned about the country's apparent lack of commitment to the sanctions, fearing that it is moving closer to Russia and away from Europe. Given the ongoing crisis in Ukraine and the ongoing tensions between Russia and the West, how Georgia continues to navigate its relationship with Russia and its obligations to the sanctions system will undoubtedly remain a key issue in its foreign policy.²⁰

Some academics have argued that Russia's military aggression on Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty may have created a window of opportunity for Tbilisi, making candidate status with the EU more feasible. However, unlike other EU candidate members, Georgia has not been able to fully capitalise on this opportunity. Given the country's recent democratic backsliding and dramatic drop in trust in the Georgian administration, the EU

¹⁶ "Georgia's Economic Dependence on Russia: Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War," Transparency International Georgia, February 22, 2023, https://transparency.ge/en/post/georgias-economic-dependence-russia-impact-russia-ukraine-war-1/?custom_searched_keyword=Georgia%27s+economic+dependence+on+Russia.

¹⁷ Kornely Kakachia Lebanidze Bidzina, "Georgian Dream Meets Georgia's Nightmare," Foreign Policy, June 25, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/25/georgian-dream-meets-georgias-nightmare/?fbclid=IwAR3DtijJPoPJQooRyOYyS2L7v97wsEy53AUsIU8kkYmRb%E2%80%A6>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Liana Fix and Coraline Kapp, "The Dangers of Democratic Backsliding in Georgia," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 21, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/article/dangers-democratic-backsliding-georgia>.

²⁰ "Georgia's Implementation of the International Sanctions Imposed against Russia," Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, November 7, 2022, https://idfi.ge/en/georgias_implementation_of_the_international_sanctions_imposed_against_russia.

declined to award the nation candidate status.²¹ It remains to be seen how the Georgian government would implement the twelve recommendations to compete with Ukraine and Moldova for EU candidate status. In this context, Georgia's ties with the West have cooled considerably because of ongoing issues with the nation's democratisation and good governance, as well as the country's stance when dealing with Moscow.

Concluding Remarks: Georgia at a Tightrope

Georgia has undergone severe transformations in its foreign policy strategy to pursue its objectives. However, to balance numerous external forces and manage its unique geopolitical position in the area, Georgia's world politics seems to have been primarily determined by the notions of realpolitik in the last decade. Strategic alliances and collaborations have been formed with partners such as Russia, the United States, and the European Union.

While Georgia has found new allies, its realignment with Russia has recently strained relations with Europe and the United States. Despite its support for sanctions on Russia, Georgia has not ceased commerce, at all, with its northern neighbour, causing major concern in the European continent. The country's approach of striving to balance the interests of many regional powers without publicly opposing any of them has created diplomatic challenges in the country's interactions with the West.

Georgia's changing foreign policy demonstrates the difficulties of using realpolitik as a guiding concept in international relations in the twenty-first century. While realpolitik has advantages, such as ensuring stability and security in a complicated and uncertain environment, it is frequently a two-edged sword. Making realistic judgements based on national interests and forming alliances with nations that may not share the same beliefs and principles is required.

Moving closer towards Russia has created an unpleasant scenario for the nation, whose voters are generally pro-Western and pro-democratic and has harmed relations with longstanding friends. Domestic politics in Georgia have become more polarised and evident;

²¹ Kornely Kakachia, "Georgian Foreign Policy Strategy in Uncertain Times," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center*, September 5, 2022: 2, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13732-georgian-foreign-policy-strategy-in-uncertain-times.html>

during 2019, and 2022, the Georgian Dream's Russia-accommodating strategy led to social opposition and domestic political issues.²²

Georgia is a strategically important country in the South Caucasus, and its foreign policy decisions have far-reaching effects in the region and beyond. Georgia's success in balancing its relationships with powerful regional actors will be critical in shaping the future of the region and beyond, and the international community will closely monitor its ongoing efforts to strengthen democratic values while pursuing realpolitik goals.

Georgia's story exemplifies the inherent dangers and challenges of realpolitik in a complex and competitive world. Georgia's growing foreign policy emphasises the crucial need of attaining realistic foreign policy goals while respecting democratic and independent ideals in the pursuit of long-term prosperity and stability. The current approach the country has taken in matters of foreign policy cannot be sustained much longer, the international community, especially the West, have made clear the implications of continuous engagement with aggressor Russia.

Georgia must set the track back towards achieving a consolidated democracy and pursue foreign policy objectives that can be sustained in the long term. The US and the European Union must work together to put more pressure on Georgian parliamentarians to follow 'EU values' if the country intends to reapproach with Europe. The government's cuddly approach to Russia, its unwillingness to politically side with the West in the Russia-Ukraine crisis and its current democratic regression under the GD party, have already deteriorated relations with strategic allies and may result in diplomatic isolation and a loss of confidence among Georgia's partners in Europe and the US.²³

²² Nini Gabritchidze , "Amid War, Bitter Exchanges Continue to Spoil Tbilisi-Kyiv Relations," eurasianet, May 4, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/amid-war-bitter-exchanges-continue-to-spoil-tbilisi-kyiv-relations>.

²³ Kornely Kakachia, "Georgian Foreign Policy Strategy in Uncertain Times," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center*, September 5, 2022: 6, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13732-georgian-foreign-policy-strategy-in-uncertain-times.html>.

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