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From failing state to strategic partner: analyzing US and NATO political elite images of Georgia and policy implications from 1991 to 2020

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates U.S. and NATO political elite images of Georgia and policy implications from 1991 to 2020. The analysis relies on the author's 44 original interviews with U.S. and NATO political elites, including U.S. Secretaries and Assistant Secretaries of States, U.S. Generals, Secretaries-General and Deputy Secretaries of NATO, and others in power in the different periods from 1991 to 2020. The study shows that three main images of Georgia have emerged over the 30-year historical period in the eyes of U.S. and NATO political elites. In the first two decades, leadership and personal connections have increased the likelihood of certain policies together with material determinants and ideational factors. In the third decade, personal ties had disappeared, but structural incentives were acknowledged by U.S. and NATO elites which impacted their policies. Moreover, results show that the U.S. relationship with Georgia has been chiefly personalized rather than institutionalized.

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Introduction

For more than 250 years, Georgia has been subject to several invasions from different empires, such as Russia, Persia, and the Ottoman Empire, which sought dominance in the Caucasus region. Having lost faith in the mediation and “honest-broker” role of Russia in its internal secessionist conflicts, after the Soviet Union’s dissolution in 1991, Georgia increasingly pursued Euro-Atlantic integration as a means to rebuild the country’s security and stability. It commenced active cooperation with the U.S. and NATO. The existing international relations (IR) literature offers three dominant explanations of US and NATO involvement in Georgia. From a theoretical perspective, the first two involve system-level theories that give importance to the role of structural constraints of the international system as the main incentives of US/NATO behavior. In this line of thinking, many authors argued that the fundamental dynamic of the US and NATO foreign policy outlook in the South Caucasus had been one of a geopolitical advance of positions (see Cornell 2003, 2004, 2007; Gardner 2007; Asmus 2010; Shaffer 2010; Bluth 2014; Gaddy and O’Hanlon 2015; Sertif 2015; Antonopoulos, Velez, and Cottle 2017; Hunter 2017; Mayer 2017; Sakwa 2017; Toal 2017). Proponents of this approach argued that – given the proximity of Georgia to Russia and Iran, in particular – preventing Russian hegemony over its Near Abroad and containment of a hostile Iran had been determining factors in those actors’ engagement in the region. After 9/11, there has been a concern in the West that Iran could possibly spread radical Islam to the new Caucasus countries; therefore, it was essential for the US to prevent Islamic terrorism from growing in the region. As a result, the global war on terrorism has become

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a critical motivational factor of US and NATO involvement in Georgia (Welt 2005; Kogan 2010). A second systemic explanation of US and NATO policy impulses in Georgia focuses on the Caspian Sea's oil resources and natural gas reserves and a geopolitically important transportation network in which Georgia operates (Khelashvili and Macfarlane 2010; Antonopoulos, Velez, and Cottle 2017). As this argument contends, the US had endorsed multiple pipeline strategies to carry Caspian energy to the Mediterranean, giving the Western market access to the reserves and to transit routes that would bypass Russia and Iran (Cornell and Yalowitz 2004; Gardner 2007; Kim and Eom 2008). This led to the creation of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, which begins in Baku, passes by the Georgian capital of Tbilisi, and makes its way to the southern Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan (Bishku 2015). The third explanation, which operates at the state level, argues that US and NATO policy towards Georgia compared to two other perspectives is rooted in ideational factors (Khelashvili and Macfarlane 2010; Bluth 2014). It has been argued that those actors' commitment to democracy promotion, human rights, and nation-building have given the impulses to their engagement in the region (Mitchell 2009, 2012; Khelashvili and Macfarlane 2010; Bluth 2014).

All three theoretical approaches rely on system- or state-level variables and assume that US and NATO leaders automatically respond to the incentives and constraints of the environment. They do not offer individual-level analysis and do not allow for the possibility that belief systems of the leaders and who leads can also matter in certain circumstances. This article tackles this scholarly deficit in the study of U.S.–Georgia and NATO–Georgia relations. The argument embedded in this manuscript is that elites and their images of Georgia are an essential source that can corroborate or weaken existing explanations of why certain US and NATO policy actions have been taken at specific times and in specific contexts in Georgia. This paper, therefore, by no means refutes the conventional accounts mentioned above, but rather, by approaching US/NATO engagement in Georgia from an individual-level perspective, tries to examine elite images of Georgia and see which of the above-mentioned arguments have been closest to the mark. An individual-level approach is not new in foreign policy analysis (Hudson 2005; Cooley and Mitchell 2009, 2010; Cooley and Nexon 2016; Nilsson 2019; McFaul 2020); previous studies have already argued that there are actors “with disproportionate power to affect national and supranational political outcomes on a continuing basis” (Best and Higley 2018, 3), who create, modify, and influence structures (Jervis 2017, 109; Walker, Malici, and Schafer 2011). As Jervis (1976, 28) mentions, “it is often impossible to explain crucial decision and policies without reference to the decision makers' beliefs about the world and their image of others.”

Therefore, this article aims to examine images held by US and NATO political elites vis-à-vis Georgia from 1991 to 2020. To do so, it uses the IR's image theory conceptual framework and employs the methodological triangulation of the author's 44 interviews with US and NATO top political elites, alongside document analysis, including of speeches, congressional hearings, press briefings, and joint statements. The analysis rests on a unique interview collection with US Secretaries of States, US Generals, US Assistant Secretaries of States, and Ambassadors of the US to Georgia; the Secretaries-General and Deputy Secretaries of NATO; and others in power in the different periods from 1991 to 2020. Those respondents were closely involved in the decision-making processes involving Georgia at different times. The interviews were initially planned and arranged as face-to-face interviews; due to the Covid-19 situation, the researcher was forced to organize interviews online using Zoom, Skype, Facetime, and telephone. Two interviews took place in August 2019, and the other 42 were conducted from 26 February to 4 June 2020. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. NVivo, the qualitative data analysis software, has been used for coding and categorizing interviews and other primary data. As this article frames the period 1991–2020, the analysis will be divided into three main phases for the nuanced presentation of the results. The first phase, 1991–2003, is from Georgia's independence to the Rose Revolution; the second phase, 2003–2012, is from the Rose Revolution to the election of the new Georgian Dream political party in Georgia in 2012; and the third phase lasts from 2012 to 2020. Based on IR image theory

determinants – namely threats, capabilities, and cultural status – for each period, I study how US and NATO political elites perceived the threats within and against Georgia, as well as the capabilities and cultural status of Georgia.

Three main findings have emerged from the novel interview data and additional primary sources. First, US and NATO elite perceptions showed that, in the first two decades, together with material determinants and ideational factors, leadership and personal connections have tended to increase the likelihood of certain policies. Specifically, it has been argued that Eduard Shevardnadze's personality and his legacy accelerated US and NATO technical and financial assistance to Georgia and promoted Georgia's involvement in the BTC pipeline in 1999. Additionally, personal ties between George W. Bush and Mikheil Saakashvili influenced the intensity and nature of US/NATO actions towards Georgia. Particularly, it had impacted the NATO Bucharest summit in 2008 when Georgia applied for a Membership Action Plan (MAP), and the allies agreed that Georgia would become a member of NATO. The second finding shows that in the third decade, personal ties had disappeared, and structural incentives were openly acknowledged in the minds of US and NATO elites, which impacted the nature of their policies and turned it into a more military domain. Third, the findings revealed that the institutionalization of the US and Georgia relationship has always lagged behind, and has been chiefly personalized rather than institutionalized. To shed some light on this, first, this article discusses the theoretical foundation of image theory. After reviewing the conceptual framework of image theory for data analysis, the paper turns to the empirical part, which presents the results and analysis. Finally, concluding remarks are presented.

Theoretical departure: IR image theory

More than six decades ago, the role of images in the international system was brought to the attention of scholars and led to the framing of image theory in international relations (IR).¹ Images in IR, as defined by the pioneer of image theory, Kenneth E. Boulding, are “the total cognitive, affective, and evaluative structure of the behavior unit” (Boulding 1959, 120). Later, Herrmann and Fischerkeller (1995, 415) revised the concept of image as “a subject's cognitive construction of a mental representation of another actor in the political world” (see also Cottam 1986). Cognitive construction is about picking up, recognizing, and interpreting knowledge through the senses, which are the basis for understanding, learning, and knowing the motivations for action (Jervis 1976, 445; Elgström and Chaban 2015, 18–19). An individual actor's perceptions of his/her surroundings are influenced by many factors, such as historical background, beliefs, and personal understandings. Therefore, image theory draws its focus from “the policymaker's perceptions and beliefs concerning a particular actor in world politics” (Alexander, Brewer, and Herrmann 1999; see also Cottam 1992) and offers a way to organize the study of perceptions and beliefs in IR (Herrmann and Fischerkeller 1995).

Images in IR are essential as they are used by decision makers to filter decisions, which have an influence on their policy options (Brecher 1972, 1973; Shimko 1991; George 1979, 1993; Cottam 1994, 21). As outlined by Cottam (1994, 27), when policymakers move to the set objectives towards another country, they are influenced by images of that country. Elite images are comprised of cognitions and beliefs regarding the target state's primary characteristics. Such characteristics have a profound impact in shaping a specific country's security, political, and economic relations towards another (Alexander, Levin, and Henry 2005). Image theory assumes that international relations revolve around the interplay of images.² It stresses the link between elite images and actions through beliefs and perceptions and contributes to the study of a nation's leaders' reaction or action toward another country (Herrmann 2003, 294; Alexander, Levin, and Henry 2005, 28).

IR image theory focuses on the trichotomy between **perceived threats**, perceived **capabilities**, and perceived **cultural distance** of others that are generally considered significant image determinants in external relations (Boulding 1956, 1959; Cottam 1977, 1994).³ *Perceived threats* provide the

basic direction of perceived relationship (Herrmann 1985, 32). By focusing on perceived threats coming from another country, we can identify whether the country is hostile or friendly (Boulding 1959; Jervis 1976, 2017; Herrmann 2003, 287; Stein 2013), and to what extent countries' goals accord with each other (Herrmann 2013). It has been argued that threat perceptions are an immediate act of recognition, take a central role in elaborating images of the target country, and influence the actor's action or reaction with regard to the target (Cohen 2005; Stein 2013). As Herrmann et al. (1997) argue, the perceived threat is an important indicator, as it may motivate the policy of one actor toward another. *The second component* involves the decision makers' image of the target country's *capabilities* and perceptions of power. It reveals the other country's strengths and benefits (Cottam 1994, 21; Cottam and Cottam 2001). Perceptions of capabilities are important when it comes to relationships or potential relationships between countries. It shows, for example, how a country's economy works, how its political and military system functions, and illustrating its strengths and weaknesses (Herrmann 2003, 286). Along with perceived intentions and capabilities, *the third component* is the perception of *cultural distance*. According to Cottam (1994) and Herrmann (1985), elaborating on other countries' cultural status is essential, as it identifies what norms are operating in the actor's country, whether it is culturally comparable or culturally distant (Herrmann and Fischerkeller 1995; Elgström 2000; Mišák 2013). These cultural assessments might affect the perception of trustworthiness and the perceived likelihood that agreements might be honored (Knodt, Chaban, and Nielsen 2017, 482). In the cultural distance determinant, I add an element about personal ties among political elites. Personal connections are not about cultural affinity or proneness; however, they belong to the same kind of soft sphere of influences and can be discussed in conjunction with the views on cultural distance. Image theorists posit that perceptions and different values of those characteristics form and shape our images of other actors and give rise to sentiments and behavioral inclinations (Larson 1994; Alexander, Brewer, and Herrmann 1999, 79; Herrmann and Fischerkeller 1995, 423; Schafer 1997; Jervis 2017, 109; Herrmann 2013). Image theory raises the importance of linkages between these three determinants (i.e. perceived threats, capabilities, and cultural distance) and strategic policy (Elgström 2000, 247). When the relationship among countries is perceived as friendly, policies are cooperative, but policies result in negative patterns if the relationship is perceived as hostile.

To summarize, this article demonstrates the analytical utility of the three image determinants: the threats, capabilities, and cultural status/personal ties of others (for Georgia in this case). The interview questions that deal with the perceptions (not knowledge) of the US and NATO respondents are organized based on these three image determinants. *First*, to assess the perceived threats, respondents were asked to assess the main threats within and against Georgia during the first, second, and third periods. This will also link to the initial dimension of foe and friend. It should be stressed that the interviewees have not experienced Georgia as such as a threat to US or NATO security, but may have perceived other major actors, particularly Russia, to pose a threat indirectly through its actual or potential influence in Georgia. *Second*, to find out about perceived capabilities, respondents were asked to reflect on the effectiveness of Georgia's political, economic, and military policies in each period. It should be noted that interviewees' responses about threats within and against Georgia sometimes address their views about Georgia's capabilities as well; therefore, the views about threats and capabilities will be merged in the findings. *Third*, studying elite views on Georgia's cultural distance, respondents were asked to assess how they saw Georgia in each period as culturally close to the West or far away. Reflections on personal friendships were also addressed in this part. It should be mentioned that the perceptions of cultural proximity remained the same throughout the second and third time periods; therefore, the paper does not discuss perceptions of the cultural distance of Georgia separately in the third phase. The perceived threats to Georgia's security, the perceived capabilities of Georgia, and the perceived cultural proximity help us understand US and NATO images of Georgia and policy implications. Since the study focuses on three different periods, any major changes in images over time will be elaborated.

The next section starts by unpacking US and NATO elite images of Georgia during the first phase (1991–2003), when Eduard Shevardnadze was leading the government, followed by the second phase (2003–2012), when Saakashvili held the government, and lastly the third phase (2012–2020), called the Georgian Dream period.

Findings

Phase I: Georgia as a failing state but a reliable partner to the US and NATO in the region

Perceptions about threats and capabilities

It is widely believed among US–NATO political elites that Georgia was in bad shape following independence in the 1990s. It was seen as an independent country sliding into a failing state, driven by internal conflicts with the Ossetians, the Abkhazians, and the extreme nationalism of Zviad Gamsakhurdia.⁴ There were questions about state survival and state integrity and about building up government mechanisms from a position where the unraveling of the Soviet Union forced Georgia into civil wars with the two breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Therefore, challenges to internal stability and the state's viability were perceived as the most critical security issues.⁵

The absence of material and soft capabilities⁶ inside the country was noted by several interviewees.⁷ For some, economic security was perceived as very important.⁸ According to former US Ambassador to Georgia William Courtney, "Economic collapse inside the country was posing a huge threat to Georgia's security. The country was quite poor and depended on humanitarian aid, including from the United States."⁹ While Georgia's devastated economy was one of the country's main challenging threats, others also considered threats coming from the inability to deal with regional conflicts. The country's military was in disarray during the Shevardnadze period.¹⁰ Due to threats to Georgia's economy and military, it was clear among the respondents that the country lacked material capabilities.

The interviewees pointed out that, during the Shevardnadze period, it was challenging to identify Georgia as a state with all the relevant democratic institutions.¹¹ Most US and NATO respondents believed that the most significant internal challenge to Georgia's security was corruption at the beginning of 2000.¹² They viewed the end of the Shevardnadze period as a period of vulnerability where security threats were the greatest because of corruption and because of the lack of real political reform in Georgia. Thus, the broader question of Georgian political society's stability was raised¹³ by pointing out Shevardnadze's inability and unwillingness to deal with those problems.¹⁴ According to the former US Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia, A. Elizabeth Jones, "Shevardnadze did not know how to democratize and liberalize the state and the economy;"¹⁵ and as the former US Secretary of States, General Colin L. Powell, mentioned, "At the end of the day, he had to step down because he was not accomplishing all the missions that he had set for himself, or all the needs, desires and wants of the Georgian people."¹⁶

Some US and NATO respondents acknowledged that there was a Russian factor behind the above-mentioned internal problems inside the country.¹⁷ As Stephen B. Nix, U.S. civil society respondent, who was working in Georgia during the Shevardnadze period pointed out, "During the Shevardnadze period, I worked in Georgia for International Republican Institute (IRI) and the lack of democracy and democratic institutions posed the problem. But I would not characterize that as an internal threat. It was a problem of Russia's development. It was more a problem of the failure to rapidly build those institutions as opposed to any sort of threat, at least in my view."¹⁸ In addition, there have been worries over the spillover of the Pankisi Gorge crisis and those issues magnifying the Russian tendency to interfere. Therefore, the Russian factor, as an external threat, remained prominent among US and NATO respondents on Georgia's security. However, what is a dividing line here is that some believe that Russia was an existential threat since the beginning of independence, while

others view Russia as an existential threat only in the late Shevardnadze period. According to the latter view, after a rough few years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia began to pose a more significant threat to Georgia's security.¹⁹

Despite Georgia's lack of economic, political, and military capabilities, and threats within and against Georgia, the geographic location of Georgia between the Caspian and the Black Sea attracted special attention to Georgia among the US–NATO political elite perceptions. According to this view, Georgia was essential to the U.S. and NATO because it bordered a NATO country and was vital for ensuring that Central Asian states and former Soviet states, including Georgia, had international partners to turn to outside the former Soviet Union.²⁰ Georgia was seen as a crucial element of energy diversification and a contributor to NATO security: “the more secure our neighbors are, the more secure we are.”²¹ Finally, Georgia's territorial proximity to Iran has been acknowledged among the respondents. This factor gave further attention to Georgia.²²

Perceptions about cultural distance

An additional key point to elaborate on regarding the US and NATO images of Georgia relates to perceptions about the country's cultural distance. First, the special role of personalities and of human connections in US–Georgia and NATO–Georgia relations during Shevardnadze's period, is pointed out.²³ In the eyes of the majority of the US/NATO respondents, Shevardnadze's personality made Georgia special. The Clinton administration and the NATO leadership looked at Shevardnadze with a great deal of affection and respect for his time as the Soviet Foreign Minister,²⁴ for his role in the break-up of the Soviet Union and in the reunification of Germany,²⁵ and for his pioneering role in Georgia.²⁶ Due to those factors and his trustworthy relationship and friendship with policymakers in the U.S., there was a lot of support for Shevardnadze and for Georgia. As the former Secretary of State of the United States, General Colin Powell, mentioned, the US was very close to Shevardnadze in a personal sense. “I have great respect, personal friendship, and a warm feeling towards Shevardnadze; he played an important role in relationships with the US.”²⁷ In his view, Georgia is one of those cases where personalities and the connection of human relations matter in foreign policymaking. Shevardnadze influenced the US and NATO interests and involvement in Georgia.²⁸ As Marc Grossman, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, outlined: “I don't know whether Georgia would have gotten the same focus and energy if someone not named Shevardnadze had been in charge. He had created, and continued to create, goodwill in the West.”²⁹

From the beginning of independence, respondents understood Georgia as an independent country fighting for its sovereignty and territorial integrity. In their reflections, respondents look at Georgia as a nation that shares the West's values.³⁰ Georgia was seen as a country that was cooperative with the West; there was a consensus regarding the country's path towards the West since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Specifically, this view emphasized the Georgian people's unbroken aspiration to join the West politically, diplomatically, and economically. According to Kenneth Wollack, a former president of the National Democratic Institute (NDI):

Even during the Shevardnadze period, Georgia was different from other states in the region for various reasons. Number one, Georgia had an overwhelming majority of the country that wanted to pursue a democratic course, that wanted to join the European community, that wanted to join NATO. Georgia's leaders were committed to European integration, to NATO expansion, and ultimately membership, and a democratic path for the country. This was something demanded by Georgian citizens. So, we have tended to look at Georgia differently than other countries in the region.³¹

It is worth adding the view of former NATO Deputy Secretary-General (DSG) Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo, observing that, “Georgia stood out in the Caucasus during the Shevardnadze period. It was a country that revealed its Euro-Atlantic aspirations. We started from that. It has not much to do with the importance of Georgia's hard defense. It is the fact that if Georgia wants to be a member of NATO, European Union, we take it seriously, and we consider Georgia from a cultural point of view to

be a European country.³² Therefore, the views about the cultural closeness of Georgia came down to the affinity that existed between the leadership of Georgia and the West. All this taken together strengthened the cultural proximity between the US–NATO and Georgia.

Policy implications of US and NATO political elites' perceptions

A dominant view among US and NATO respondents was that they saw Georgia as a country that aspired to US and NATO friendship.³³ Based on the responses, the US approached the friendship through sending vast amounts of humanitarian assistance, international aid,³⁴ as well as creating institutional ties to NATO.³⁵ Respondents who emphasized the financial assistance argued that US financial aid to Georgia in the first years of independence was importantly impacted by the perceptions of internal threats to Georgia's security. The importance of Georgia's economic independence as one of the guarantors of the country's safe security environment is acknowledged among the respondents. Those views, together with the influence of Shevardnadze's personality and the perceived cultural proximity to Georgia, led to Georgia's involvement in an international project, namely, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. According to Marc Grossman, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs:

We supported Georgia's efforts to become economically and politically independent. One way to do that was to involve Georgia in what was originally conceived as the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, which later became the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) Pipeline. The pipeline was a part of a US grand strategy to encourage multiple pipelines to bring energy resources from Central Asia to world markets. People who had a broader vision convinced us that if the pipeline could go through Tbilisi, and not just Azerbaijan and Turkey, it would be extremely positive for Georgia's security environment. It would also be a way of getting Turkey connected to Georgia.³⁶

Shevardnadze played an important role in the development of this pipeline, with support from the US.³⁷ The project for construction of the BTC pipeline – which was signed in 1999 between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey – was a concrete expression of giving Georgia political oxygen and the ability to be an independent actor.³⁸ According to Elizabeth Jones, the former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia, BTC was seen “as a significant signal to Russia that Georgia was quite prepared to stand on its own two feet.”³⁹ In the words of Victoria Nuland, who currently serves as Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, “having an alternative source of oil and gas from Azerbaijan, and independence from Russia in terms of energy transportation, would give Georgia economic independence.”⁴⁰ Moreover, as stated by a former US Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia, “In 1999–2000, I was working on the Caspian pipeline; it was essential to the US that countries of the region could have independence from Russia in terms of energy transportation.”⁴¹ Including Georgia in such a pipeline and making it an energy transit country, would help its sovereignty, as Russia would be very reluctant to try to interfere and thereby create an international crisis. The BTC pipeline was a turning point because it would make Georgia less susceptible to undue pressure.⁴² In addition, the BTC pipeline was seen as critical for global energy security and part of the US grand strategy. According to former U.S. Ambassador to Georgia Kenneth S. Yalowitz, “the mantra that we used is – happiness is multiple pipelines.”⁴³ Therefore, views from the respondents showed that Georgia's involvement in the first significant long-term US post-Soviet investment in more substantial, greater European energy security would create political and institutional ties with NATO and the US and also make Georgia more important to the US and NATO security.⁴⁴

Summary

To summarize, the findings from the US–NATO elite perceptions on the threats, capabilities, and cultural status of Georgia pictured Georgia both as a failing state and a reliable partner. This contradiction of the images might be bridged by the warmth that existed among West elites towards Shevardnadze and the Georgian public's warmth and their aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration. Those factors, among others, as argued by respondents, seemed to increase the likelihood of certain US and NATO assistance: i.e. financial aid to Georgia and its involvement in the BTC pipeline.

Another important observation that can be made from the perceptions mentioned above is that even though Shevardnadze was seen as ineffective in his second term, the US and NATO still supported aid to Georgia. There are two main reasons for this: first, abandoning Georgia in that complex geopolitical environment, bordering Russia and Iran, would decrease Western influence in the region, and second, the willingness of the Georgian public kept the hope among the US–NATO elites that that country would ultimately be successful.

Phase II: Georgia as a friend and partner country to the US–NATO

Perceptions about threats and capabilities

Georgia went through internal turmoil, namely the Rose Revolution, which was the first example of the transition of power in Georgia.⁴⁵ Respondents saw a positive move regarding Georgia's capabilities, through economic liberalization, anti-corruption campaigns, and real government reforms in the first years after the Rose Revolution.⁴⁶ In their view, the new government halted Georgia's deterioration, the Georgian economy recovered, and institutions and organizations started strengthening and functioning. It is argued that "Saakashvili's leadership – especially in its early years – helped Georgia emerge from the stagnation and decay of the Shevardnadze period into a period of rapid economic growth. That was critical to its security."⁴⁷ Despite those changing positive reflections regarding Georgia's capabilities, including the economic and political system, an internal danger to Georgia's security environment in Saakashvili's period, especially after 2006, is still acknowledged among respondents. While some views concern the fact that power was concentrated in one person's hands,⁴⁸ others focus on the takeover of the TV station and the crackdown on protests by the government in Tbilisi in November 2007.⁴⁹

However, while reflecting on the threats within and against Georgia, much of the focus was placed on the external dimension of the threats. Therefore, the trajectory of risks moved from internal towards external during the second phase, when Saakashvili came into the government.⁵⁰ According to interviewees, Russia was concerned about the color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, and the potential spread to Russia. The Rose Revolution was Putin's nightmare, and Moscow became more aggressive towards Georgia under Saakashvili.⁵¹ As the former US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice observed,

It is true that Saakashvili's election moved the Georgia–Russia relationship from latent tension to open hostility: his determination to defend South Ossetia and Abkhazia struck sharply belligerent tones. But the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, which followed soon after, was the last straw for Russia. They saw the revolutions chipping away at their influence in the old Soviet bloc, and watching Ukraine—an ancestral home of Slavdom—drift further Westward was a wrenching blow. Russia undoubtedly saw the consecutive color revolutions as further cause for intervention in Georgia, raising the chances of war.⁵²

In the perception of US and NATO respondents, the Russian threats to Georgia's security increased during the Saakashvili period. Georgia's democratic development and Western orientation on the one hand, and, on the other, intemperate statements by Saakashvili and his team, intensified the Russian military posture towards Georgia.⁵³ The first wave of perceived threats to Georgia's security coming from Russia was verbal, in Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, where geography was recognized as a determining factor.⁵⁴ After that the geopolitical environment became more hostile to Georgia and the prospect of military intervention increased. The next most apparent articulation of the security threat from Russia was after the Bucharest summit, where the allies agreed that Georgia would become a member of NATO. Russian military actions and Russia's willingness to use force on Georgian territory were intensified, which was most dramatically exemplified by the 2008 August War between Russia and Georgia.⁵⁵ However, some respondents also emphasized the importance of Saakashvili's actions, which were seen as an additional incentive for worsening the external threats. As the former Secretary of State General Powell notes, "the conflict that got started between Georgia and Russia, my personal view is that it

was something that should have been avoided”⁵⁶ and as stated by Elizabeth Jones, the former US Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia, “We had told Saakashvili a million times, over and over, in every meeting for years, that he needed to keep his sword in its sheath, he should not sabre-rattle, he needed to not provoke the Russians, because Russia would take advantage of him. And if he provoked them, the US was not going to help him, there was nobody in NATO or the US or anybody else who was going to come to his aid in any way.”⁵⁷ Furthermore, the former NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer mentioned that “It is too farfetched to imagine NATO waging war with Russia over Georgia.”⁵⁸ Those views capture Saakashvili as a hothead and reckless and contrast with the positive image he received during his first term as president.

Both US and NATO elites’ concern about Russia’s meddling in Georgia was clearly emphasized during the Saakashvili period, first after the Rose Revolution, then after the Bucharest Summit and, more importantly, during the August War 2008. Before, US and NATO elites saw it as unlikely that Russia would violate the borders of its neighbor, but this notion was changed during Saakashvili’s tenure. Now, there were concerns over rising complications in the NATO–Russia and Russia–US relationships. According to former NATO Secretary General Scheffer:

Georgia has always been an important element in the relationship between the NATO–Russia. When I came to NATO section in 2004, that relationship and the general atmosphere was quite good; we had the Founding Act. But after some time, the NATO–Russia relationship became more complicated. That had as a consequence that Georgia became a negative focal point in the relationship between NATO and Russia, and Putin became more and more assertive.⁵⁹

Moreover, as former Secretary of State Rice further elaborates:

The 2008 war proved a lasting strain on US–Russia relations. Despite the Obama administration’s attempted diplomatic “reset” in 2009, the war in Georgia was a breaking point, and relations between the US and Russia were never quite the same. Even if concerns in the Caucasus were not central to its own national security, the United States found itself in a newly intensified period of US–Russian strain as Putin’s domestic politics turned ever more anti-American; this antagonism, to be sure, has contributed to a broader and longer-lasting threat to US security.⁶⁰

Following the August War, Western elites saw Georgia as less secure. They stressed the obvious Russian threat, as the war resulted in Russian control over 20% of Georgian territory.⁶¹ This influenced the view that Georgia had become more vulnerable both externally and internally. Internally, the Georgian economy collapsed after the war, and questions about retaining state sovereignty became essential among elites.⁶² Externally, Georgia became more vulnerable because of the military bases that were deployed by Russia on occupied Georgian territory and because of the geostrategic threat posed by Russia to Georgia.⁶³

Perceptions about cultural distance

Discussing Georgia’s cultural distance during the Saakashvili period involves reflections about mostly the same aspects as in the era of Shevardnadze, though with a different approach and different dynamics. Starting with the first aspect, the role of personalities and connections remains prominent in the minds of the US and NATO elites. The common view is that in the early years of the Rose Revolution, Saakashvili’s personality influenced their view of Georgia. He was seen as Western educated, modern, fresh, and hard working, taking Georgia in the right direction and building Georgia’s security. When it comes to personal ties between the US and Georgia, and between the leadership of NATO and Georgia’s administration, they remain among US elites, but the perception of closeness and of personal ties did not occur among NATO elites. Saakashvili’s administration had friendship with the Bush administration and with many members of Congress.⁶⁴

The US and NATO elites refer to the majority of the Georgian people’s overriding desire to join the West. The Rose Revolution was seen as an act that was a natural result of the Georgian people’s demands for dignity, human rights, and democracy. They featured this act as an expression of

Georgians seeking closer institutional ties with the West. According to Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, "Under the leadership of Saakashvili, it was clear that the large majority of Georgia's population wanted to become a NATO member."⁶⁵ In addition to this view, all respondents stressed the significance of Georgia's military deployments in international missions in Iraq and in Afghanistan, and pointed out that Georgian troops were highly valued by policymakers and American military planners. It was seen as a significant expression of the Georgian people's robust orientation towards Western military structures.⁶⁶ In the words of John F. Tefft, a former US Ambassador to Georgia, "Georgian troops were highly valued. They were really good soldiers, and people thought they did a good job for the roles that they were asked to play in Iraq and have done equally well, as part of the International force in Afghanistan. And I wouldn't underestimate that because I think it's a significant fact in the minds of American military planners and policymakers more broadly."⁶⁷ Georgia was also included in the Bush Freedom Agenda, with the aim to build democracy and incorporate the new nations into the broader European security framework. Based on that policy, some of the US elites interviewed had a belief that Georgia was leading the way for many countries to join the West and that the country was a shining example of how the freedom agenda could work around the world.⁶⁸

Policy implications of US and NATO political elites' perceptions

In the second phase, the US and NATO elites' framed Georgia as a friend and partner because of post-Rose Revolution reforms under Saakashvili, the improvement of democratic institutions, and what Georgia did in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁶⁹ According to Jaap de Hoop Scheffer "Georgia was and is seen as a friend and a partner, but a friend we cannot invite into the house. We can do things together, but we cannot hug each other because that hug seems too dangerous."⁷⁰

Georgia was considered to be on a clear path to Western-style democracy. The Bush administration saw emergent democracy as a bulwark against terrorism and remained committed to supporting democratically elected leaders in the former Soviet sphere. As Victoria Nuland elaborated, "I was working for Vice President Cheney at that time. We went to the Congress and asked for a large support package for Georgia after the Rose Revolution. We wanted to support the continued democratic evolution and reform efforts there. We thought that Georgia could set an example for the whole region."⁷¹ Strengthened institutional ties with NATO after the Rose Revolution are also recognized: "The first element of our new Partnership is the Individual Partnership Action Plan. This Plan responds to the desire of Partners who want to engage in a more intensive and demanding relationship with NATO."⁷² After the policies coming from the US and NATO for strengthening democratic institutions and institutional ties with the West, the joint visible policy action towards Georgia was introduced at the NATO Bucharest summit. It was presented as a Bucharest summit initiative for giving a Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Georgia and Ukraine, something which was, however, blocked by the summit. Even though this was a joint initiative, answers coming from the respondents reveal the ambivalent views about this policy initiative. As US elites argue, President Bush thought that a MAP would be the right step and the natural thing in continuing to work together.⁷³ According to State Secretary Rice:

U.S. efforts on this membership initiative were a balancing act: managing Russian frustration, signaling our confidence and trust in new members of NATO, and acknowledging the concerns of our Western European allies. In the end, however, it was President Bush's commitment to the principle that drove us forward. He argued that if two democratic states sought admission to NATO, he couldn't deny them that opportunity.⁷⁴

This view seems controversial and is not shared by NATO elites. They pointed out that the country was not prepared for the MAP, and that it could create problems rather than solving them. At the same time, they emphasized the challenge coming from Russia. Interviewees emphasized that EU and NATO members were not considering taking this policy initiative to the Bucharest summit if President Bush did not insist upon it. And, if he did not, the allies would not agree at the Bucharest summit in 2008 that Georgia would become a member of NATO one day,⁷⁵ and therefore there

would be no discussion about it later.⁷⁶ We can evidently see that the allies ultimately found a compromise in the language, which is still in place today; since then, NATO has reaffirmed its decision that Georgia will become a member of NATO one day.

Another point reflects the West's policy towards Georgia during and after the August War. US and NATO officials argued that the 2008 war was a conflict in which the US was hardly eager to participate militarily.⁷⁷ US officials pointed out that the Bush administration had done its best to avert a war, sending warning signals to the Russian government behind the scenes and urging Saakashvili to keep a cool head. As Secretary Rice mentions, "We were determined to avoid turning the conflict into a US–Russian faceoff and deliberately coordinated our response with OSCE, France, and – later – NATO."⁷⁸ Furthermore, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of European Affairs Daniel Fried argues that "The United States' reaction to the 2008 Russo–Georgian War was principally to defend Georgia's democracy and save the rest of Georgia from occupation; that succeeded and stabilized the Georgian economy."⁷⁹ After the war, the US and NATO elites looked at Georgia as a country that survived but needed immediate help to keep its independence.⁸⁰ In the words of Michael Carpenter, served in the White House as a foreign policy advisor to Vice President Joe Biden:

Georgia had strong bipartisan support after the war. Vice President Biden, who at the time was a Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman, traveled to Georgia in August of 2008. He called for a billion-dollar reconstruction package, which the Bush administration eventually approved. And so, Georgia got a billion dollars to reconstruct its infrastructure and economy after the war.⁸¹

After Obama came to power, the US–Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership was adopted in 2009, something that provided strong US support for Georgia's continued sovereignty and independence (Nichol 2013, 25) and further institutionalized the US relationship with Georgia.⁸² According to this charter, in the security realm, "the United States and Georgia intend to expand the scope of their ongoing defense and security cooperation programs to defeat [threats to global peace and stability] and to promote peace and stability."⁸³ On the part of NATO, a NATO–Georgia Commission was formed and became the framework for cooperation between NATO and Georgia.⁸⁴ The US and NATO respondents saw the need for more institutional ties with Georgia due to its vulnerable security environment.

Summary

Some major observations emerge from the analysis of US and NATO respondents' images of Georgia's security during the Saakashvili period. First, the domination of internal threats has been replaced by external threats to Georgia's security. Views on Georgia's capabilities represent Georgia as an economically and politically improved country, but mostly at the beginning of Saakashvili's government reforms. Second, much focus has been placed on Bush's and Saakashvili's ties; however, NATO relations with Georgia were not personalized during the Saakashvili period. As for the cultural closeness, it is highlighted by both US and NATO respondents by stressing the Georgian people's will to be in the West, and their contribution and commitment to international missions. Those views featured Georgia as a friend, partner, and ally, but respondents emphasized the ally aspect in international missions. Third, the initiative taken at the NATO Bucharest summit might be explained by Bush's and Saakashvili's personal ties rather than by structural or geopolitical lines of reasoning.

Phase III: Georgia as a beneficial and strategic partner state to the US and NATO

Perceptions about threats and capabilities

Georgia demonstrated its political maturity with a peaceful transition from Saakashvili to the new government after the Georgian Dream party came into power in 2012, and thus reinforced and strengthened the image of a partner country.⁸⁵ As the former deputy secretary general (DSG) of NATO Alexander Vershbow mentions, "It was seen as a sign that Georgia deserved the kind of support that we've been giving to the Central European countries."⁸⁶ Moreover, some respondents

pointed out the new government's very good job in strengthening the military and the democratic institutions and in reforming the economy, as well as the practical cooperation with NATO and the US. As seen by the former Deputy Secretary General of NATO Rose E. Gottemoeller:

10 years later, after the war, Georgia was extremely smart about turning itself into a very good NATO partner ... when I look at the three periods, the meaning of Georgia to NATO particularly has taken shape in the last five to ten years ... Georgia did everything it could to turn itself into a valuable partner for NATO. And that is the ground truth of the matter today, in my view.⁸⁷

While reflecting on the threats against Georgia in the third phase, most of the respondents see Georgia as a country that is under considerable threat from Russia, in terms of both conventional military assaults and hybrid warfare.⁸⁸ The external environment is now much more threatening, and specific facts about where Russian threats are coming from are emphasized. First, respondents express their concerns about the fact that 20% of Georgia's territory is occupied by Russia with substantial military presence on Georgian soil; as one of the NATO respondents asserts, "the fact that you have Russian troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, 5000 in Abkhazia and 5000 in South Ossetia, is certainly security threats for Georgia."⁸⁹ Second, the respondents express their concerns about Russia's regular creeping annexation along the Georgian–South Ossetian boundary, termed "borderization." It created a physical barrier around the territory of South Ossetia and it separated people from their livelihoods.⁹⁰ The third view concerns Russia's intelligence presence in Georgia, cyber, and disinformation threats. There is an increase in Russian assertive behavior in Georgia's territories, mainly through disinformation and the funding of NGOs.⁹¹ As one of the NATO respondents mentions, "the reason why we see more of this now than we did in the previous decade is that technology has facilitated the disinformation."⁹²

There is also a view that Georgia's security has become a more significant concern for the US and NATO members as an indirect result of Russian military aggression in Ukraine in 2014 and its military build-up in Crimea.⁹³ The case of Crimea was a significant turning point. Regional security (and Georgia's security) and Georgia's geographical location received more attention in the eyes of US and NATO respondents after 2014.⁹⁴ As US General Joseph Francis Dunford Jr. states,

Georgia's importance from a geostrategic perspective is inextricably linked to how the US perceives Russia. The more the US recognizes Russia as a threat, the more attention goes to Georgia ... The US didn't begin to publicly recognize Russia as a threat until 2014, and we did not acknowledge great power competition with Russia until our 2017 National Defense Strategy.⁹⁵

Thus, Georgia's importance grows for the US military. The introduction of the National Defense strategy in 2017 was the first time that the US acknowledged it is in an era of great power competition and recognized Russia and China as competitors. In the reflections of the majority of US and NATO respondents, Georgia provides a bulwark against Russian aggression in the Black Sea region, and an alternative to Russian energy pipelines.

Responses from both sides reveal worries about declining and unpleasant trends of democracy in Georgia, but only after 2018.⁹⁶ On the one hand, the challenges to the judiciary are emphasized; as U.S. congressman David Price points out, there are "some continuing questions about the judicial branch of government and how judges are going to be appointed."⁹⁷ On the other, the lack of media and political pluralism is mentioned.⁹⁸ Respondents are concerned about the internal division between the opposition parties and the government and think that it undermines the consensus about the country's strategic direction towards the Western community, which then plays into the external challenge. As former U.S. Ambassador to Georgia Ian Kelly indicates, "One-party government is a real danger to Georgia. There's a kind of slow-moving away from the Western community. I think the real turning point for me was the failure (in 2017) to get agreement on a new electoral system that would have more accurately allocated seats according to the proportional system."⁹⁹ A few respondents are concerned about the presence of oligarchical power in Georgia and its ties with Russia.¹⁰⁰

Policy implications of US and NATO political elites' perceptions

Overall, NATO and US interviewees emphasized that after 2012 Georgia became an increasingly strong, beneficial, and strategic security/political partner for NATO and the US. The shared view is that Georgia had to build defense institutions in order to be Westernized, and they recognized the need for a security-oriented relationship with Georgia.¹⁰¹ According to US respondents, President Obama and the US administration took the security support of Georgia to a new level and, together with economic and political support, focused on increasing Georgia's defense capabilities, and this policy was continued by the Trump administration.¹⁰² However, until 2014 there were no actual programs, on the part of either the US or NATO, that would increase Georgia's ability to defend itself against Russia. All previous NATO and US training and equipping programs were intended to help Georgia build a capability to deploy to Iraq or Afghanistan.¹⁰³

In the reflections of the US and NATO respondents, the Ukrainian situation gave the US and NATO the opening to step up the security relationship with Georgia. On the one hand, U.S. respondents started realizing that they were focusing only on training Georgian soldiers for counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan and neglecting any territorial defense training component. This is why they bolstered bilateral defense cooperation with Georgia and came up with a new Georgia defense readiness program (GDRP) that "endeavors to improve Georgia's self-sustainable institutional capacity to generate, train, and sustain forces to defend Georgia's territorial integrity and deter Russia."¹⁰⁴ On the other, some NATO officials stressed the challenge of NATO security in the Black Sea region and recognized the need to contain Russian expansionism, increase the naval presence in the Black Sea, improve the ability to counter the anti-access area denial, and protect the regional countries (including Georgia) from the potential Russian threats. As a result, the Black Sea security strategy was created. According to Former S.G. of NATO Anders Fogh Rasmussen:

The Black Sea strategy is connected with the Russian illegal annexation of Crimea and the strengthening of the NATO Territorial Defense in the east. It makes it easier to conduct exercises, training interoperability initiatives with Georgia. So, I considered Georgia a vital part of the Black Sea security strategy as it gives Georgia an excellent opportunity to be not only a consumer but a provider of NATO security.¹⁰⁵

Moreover, Gottemoeller adds, "We needed to be doing more training and exercising in the Black Sea, and we needed to do everything we could to help Georgia and Ukraine."¹⁰⁶ According to NATO respondents, for the reasons mentioned earlier, the Substantial NATO–Georgia Package (SNGP) that was adopted at the NATO Wales summit in 2014 intensified NATO–Georgia security relations and increased Georgian defense capabilities. While some NATO and US respondents argued that SNGP and GDRP are the first programs ever where the intent is to help Georgia gain the ability to defend itself against Russia, others emphasized the fact that this strategy gave Georgia a seat at a regional table where NATO members sit.¹⁰⁷

Summary

In the third phase, several main observations emerged from the findings. First, Georgia's security is framed as externally vulnerable in relation to Russia and China. However, challenges related to democratic backsliding and their influence on Georgia's security are recognized after 2018. Second, while looking at Georgia's capabilities and cultural distance after 2012, Georgia is framed as a beneficial and strategic partner state of the US and NATO, showing a solid state capacity, especially in the military domain. The country's geographic location and its location bordering on the Black Sea provided additional strengths to Georgia in the views of US and NATO respondents, especially after 2014, when this region became an area of concern. Third, structural and geopolitical argumentation is openly acknowledged and has dominated during the third phase compared to the previous two. As a result, we see US and NATO military policies focusing on strengthening Georgia's military defense for the first time during this period.

Concluding remarks

This article contributes to the literature on NATO–Georgia and US–Georgia relations and, in general, to scholarship on US and NATO foreign policy towards Georgia. Even though this topic has been studied from different perspectives, the perspective afforded by image theory remains under-addressed in the works on NATO–Georgia and US–Georgia relations. This article has attempted to fill that gap and explored US/NATO elite images of Georgia from 1991 to 2020; therefore, it offers a longitudinal take on perceptions and images. This study also tried to elaborate whether there were policy implications for images coming from the US and NATO political elites. Based on unique empirical data, I demonstrate how these images changed over time.

A clear trajectory of the evolution of the three main images held by US and NATO elites emerges:

- (1) Georgia as a failing state but a reliable partner in the region to the US and NATO.
- (2) Georgia as a friend and partner to the US and NATO.
- (3) Georgia as a beneficial and strategic partner to the US and NATO.

The first image refers to the fact that there were concerns about the internal survival of Georgia during the first phase. Still, at the same time, the desires of the Georgian public for Euro-Atlantic integration and Shevardnadze's personality, his role in peacefully concluding the Cold War, featured the country as a reliable partner in the region. The second image indicates that post–Rose Revolution reforms implemented by Saakashvili strengthened capabilities of the country and the Georgian people's willingness to be part of the West framed Georgia as a friend and partner during the second phase in the eyes of the US and NATO. The third image suggests that Georgia's state capacity, and economic, political, and military capabilities have improved during the third phase in the elite mindset. Respondents emphasized Georgia's importance in macro-regional security and the need for further cooperation in security realms, especially after the Crimea annexation of 2014. Those perceptions framed Georgia as a beneficial and strategic partner to the US and NATO.

Furthermore, two important observations can be made from the results. First, while personal connections were highly emphasized in the first and second phases, we no longer see lines of reasoning around personal ties among Georgian and US/NATO political elites in the third phase. In contrast, respondents stress structural and geopolitical arguments, including explicit concerns about Russia and China, and emphasize Georgia's state capacity and military capabilities. Second, compared to the first two phases, we see respondents openly acknowledged the structural concerns in the third phase.

Policy implications for those perceptions can be seen in two instances. First, this study has revealed the importance of Shevardnadze's personality in influencing US and NATO engagement in Georgia and promoting Georgia's involvement in the BTC project. Second, it has emerged from the results that the Bush–Saakashvili friendship and elite attitudes among administrations deserve credit for initiating a MAP for Georgia at the Bucharest summit and the allies' agreement that Georgia will eventually become a member of NATO. Therefore, if it had been a different leader of Georgia than Shevardnadze, or a different president of the US than Bush, Georgia might not have been included in the BTC pipeline in 1999, the MAP for Georgia would not have been initiated at the NATO Bucharest summit in 2008, and agreement that Georgia would (eventually) be admitted NATO would not have been reached. In addition to those policy implications, an essential observation can be made regarding the US–Georgia and NATO–Georgia institutional relationship. As we have seen from the results, there has been continuing cooperation between the actors since the independence of Georgia; however, the relationship did not develop along stable institutional lines, but rather respondents emphasized personal ties in the first two phases and structural motivations in the third decade. This does not mean that an attempt for stabilized institutional cooperation was not always on the table, but having a personalized relationship increased the uncertainty and decreased the trust that, in the end, affected the poor institutionalization of the US relationship with Georgia.

To summarize, this article provides unique empirical evidence on US and NATO elite images of Georgia over a 30-year period and offers a detailed and nuanced analysis of US–Georgia and NATO–Georgia relations. The findings reveal that the three main images of Georgia have evolved over time. By examining those images, we can argue that – together with geopolitical and ideological variables – individual-level variables have played a role in US and NATO elite mindsets, which has had some important policy implications.

Notes

1. For a short overview of useful discussions on images in international relations, see Boulding (1956, 1959, 1962), Jervis (1970), and Herrmann (2003).
2. For a more recent overview of image theory, see Herrmann (2013).
3. For a more recent elaboration of those aspects, see Herrmann (2013).
4. John C. Kornblum; former NATO senior official; William Courtney; Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo; Kenneth Spencer Yalowitiz; Marc Grossman; Jones 1995. The notation introduced in this note, and followed in subsequent endnotes in this article, refers to the author's original interviews with respondents or to a primary document. Where there is a name only (not followed by a year), reference is to the author's interview with the respondent; details about the timing and place of the interviews, as well as when the interviewees served in the position where they interacted with Georgia, are provided in the Appendix in the section titled "Interview details." When there is a name followed by a year, reference is to a primary document (not listed in the References list), which also can be found in the Appendix in the section titled "Primary documents."
5. R. Nicholas Burns; David Kramer; William Courtney; Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo; Richard L. Morningstar, Marc Behrendt; former NATO senior official.
6. Material instruments refer to a country's military and economic power, soft instruments to a country's normative power.
7. General Colin L. Powell; A. Elizabeth Jones; John E. Herbst; former NATO senior official 1995–1998; Jones 1995.
8. John C. Kornblum; Kenneth Yalowitiz; Kenneth Wollack; Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo.
9. William Courtney.
10. Former White House official; Nicholas Burns; Elizabeth Jones; David Kramer; Wörner 1993.
11. Former NATO senior official; Commission on Security Cooperation in Europe 2003.
12. John E. Herbst; Mark Mullen; Campbell 2003; Jones 1995.
13. Damon Wilson; Kenneth Wollack; Marc Grossman; John C. Kornblum.
14. Elizabeth Jones; Kenneth Yalowitiz.
15. Elizabeth Jones.
16. General Colin L. Powell.
17. Alexander Vershbow; Nicholas Burns.
18. Stephen B. Nix.
19. Kurt D. Volker; Damon Wilson; former White House official.
20. Richard L. Morningstar; Marc Grossman; Nicholas Burns; Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo; former NATO senior official.
21. Robertson 2000.
22. Condoleezza Rice; General Colin L. Powell; Nicholas Burns.
23. William J. Clinton 1994.
24. Marc Grossman; former NATO senior official; McCurry 1997.
25. Kenneth Yalowitiz; Richard Morningstar.
26. Daniel Fried; Mark Mullen; and John C. Kornblum.
27. General Colin L. Powell.
28. Former White House official; former NATO senior official; Steinberg 1993.
29. Marc Grossman.
30. McConnell 1997; Kennedy 1998.
31. Kenneth Wollack.
32. Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo.
33. Elizabeth Jones; former White House official; Steinberg 1993; Jones 1995; Robertson 2003.
34. General Colin L. Powell; Richard Morningstar; William Courtney; John C. Kornblum; William J. Clinton 1994.
35. John C. Kornblum; Kenneth S. Yalowitiz; Wörner 1993.
36. Marc Grossman.
37. Richard Morningstar; General Colin L. Powell; Daniel Fried.
38. Former U.S. White House official; Clinton 2000.
39. Elizabeth Jones.
40. Victoria Nuland.

41. Elizabeth Jones.
42. Richard Morningstar.
43. Kenneth S. Yalowitz.
44. Former NATO senior official; Richardson 1999.
45. Bush 2005.
46. Elizabeth Jones; Jaap de Hoop Scheffer; Davis 2004.
47. Daniel Fried.
48. Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo; David Price; Kenneth Wollack.
49. David Kramer; Victoria Nuland; Lincoln Mitchell.
50. Condoleezza Rice; Jaap de Hoop Scheffer; Michael Carpenter; John F. Tefft; Robert E. Hamilton; Kurt D. Volker; Damon Wilson.
51. Jaap de Hoop Scheffer; Daniel Fried; Nicholas Burns; Michael Carpenter; Kurt Volker; Damon Wilson; Marc Behrendt.
52. Condoleezza Rice.
53. Richard Miles, US ambassador to Georgia 2002–2005; John C. Kornblum; Condoleezza Rice; Nicholas Burns; current US Foreign Service officer.
54. For further elaboration of Putin's speech, see Parkhitko and Martynenko (2018).
55. Luke Coffey; Matthew L. Brand; Lincoln Mitchell.
56. General Colin L. Powell.
57. Elizabeth Jones.
58. Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.
59. Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.
60. Condoleezza Rice.
61. John Chicky; Victoria Nuland; David Price.
62. Condoleezza Rice; Robert E. Hamilton; John F. Tefft.
63. Michael Carpenter; Michael Anthony McFaul; and Matthew L. Brand.
64. US Foreign Service official and Former NATO senior official.
65. Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.
66. Condoleezza Rice; John F. Tefft; Michael Carpenter; Nicholas Burns; Daniel Fried; Marc Grossman; Robert E. Hamilton; Alexander Vershbow; Alexander Cooley; Stephen Jones; Lincoln Mitchell.
67. John F. Tefft.
68. Paul Stronski; Damon Wilson; Michael Carpenter; Matthew L. Brand.
69. General Joseph Francis Dunford Jr.; Condoleezza Rice; Nicholas Burns; Alexander Vershbow; General Colin L. Powell; Jaap de Hoop Scheffer; Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo; John F. Tefft; US academics.
70. Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.
71. Victoria Nuland.
72. Robertson 2003.
73. Daniel Fried; Kurt Volker; Daniel Fried; John E. Herbst; Paul Stronski; Bush 2008; Biden and Lugar 2008.
74. Condoleezza Rice.
75. NATO Bucharest Summit Declaration, 2008.
76. Damon Wilson.
77. Daniel Fried; David Kramer; Jaap de Hoop Scheffer; John F. Tefft; Damon Wilson.
78. Condoleezza Rice.
79. Daniel Fried.
80. Fried 2008.
81. Michael Carpenter.
82. Michael Carpenter; Michael McFaul.
83. US Department of State Archive 2009.
84. Rasmussen 2011; Rasmussen 2013.
85. Ian C. Kelly; David Kramer; Alexander Vershbow; Michael McFaul; David Price; Kurt Volker; Poe 2016.
86. Alexander Vershbow.
87. Rose E. Gottemoeller.
88. Alexander Vershbow; Michael Carpenter; John Chicky; Robert E. Hamilton; Current U.S. Foreign Service Officer; Luke Coffey; Russell 2016; Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe 2018.
89. Current NATO senior official.
90. Current U.S. Foreign Service officer and current NATO senior official; Poe 2018.
91. Current U.S. Foreign Service officer and current NATO senior official.
92. Current NATO senior official.
93. Rose E. Gottemoeller; General Joseph Francis Dunford Jr.; John Chicky; Kurt Volker; David Kramer.
94. Anders Fogh Rasmussen; Alexander Vershbow; Victoria Nuland; Ian C. Kelly; Poe 2018.
95. General Joseph Francis Dunford Jr.

96. Damon Wilson; Kenneth Wollack; Kurt Volker; Current U.S. Foreign Service officer; current NATO senior official.
97. David Price.
98. Michael Carpenter; Victoria Nuland; current U.S. Foreign Service officer and current NATO senior official.
99. Ian C. Kelly. It should be noted that the interview with Ambassador Kelly took place in April 2020. Later, in June 2020, there was a breakthrough in Georgia with respect to electoral reform, which came after the government and the opposition agreed to back reforms.
100. Rose E. Gottemoeller; Victoria Nuland; Olson 2020.
101. Anders Fogh Rasmussen; Ian C. Kelly; John Chicky; Michael McFaul; Rose E. Gottemoeller; Robert E. Hamilton.
102. Current U.S. Foreign Service officer; Spicer 2017.
103. Current U.S. Foreign Service officer; current NATO senior official; Robert E. Hamilton; Ian C. Kelly.
104. U.S. Department of State 2020.
105. Anders Fogh Rasmussen.
106. Rose E. Gottemoeller.
107. Ian C. Kelly; John Chicky; Robert E. Hamilton; Anders Fogh Rasmussen; Alexander Vershbow.

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I declare that this manuscript is original, has not been published before, and is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere. Data are original and all quotations that have been used in this article are agreed in advance with respondents.

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Appendix

Interview details

1. **General Colin L. Powell**, US 65th Secretary of State 2001–2005; telephone interview, 26 March 2020.
2. **Condoleezza Rice**, US 66th Secretary of State 2005–2009; answers provided in a written form, by email, 27 May 2020.
3. **Jaap de Hoop Scheffer**, NATO Secretary-General 2004–2009; Zoom interview, Sweden, 17 April 2020.
4. **Anders Fogh Rasmussen**, NATO Secretary-General 2009–2014; Zoom interview, Sweden, 4 June 2020.
5. **Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo**, Deputy Secretary-General of NATO 2001–2007; Zoom interview, 17 April 2020.

6. **Rose E. Gottemoeller**, Deputy Secretary-General of NATO 2016–2019; Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs 2012–2016; Zoom interview, Cambridge, MA, 23 March 2020.
7. **Alexander Vershbow**, United States Ambassador to NATO 1997–2000; United States Ambassador to Russia 2001–2005; Deputy Secretary-General of NATO 2012–2016; Skype interview, Cambridge, MA, 17 March 2020.
8. **General Joseph Francis Dunford Jr.**, United States Marine Corps general; 19th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff 2015–2019; in-person interview, Harvard Kennedy School, Cambridge, MA, 5 March 2020.
9. **A. Elizabeth Jones**, US Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasian Affairs 2001–2005, Skype interview, Cambridge, MA, 20 March 2020.
10. **Daniel Fried**, US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs 2005–2009; Special Assistant to the President and a member of the staff of the National Security Council 2001–2005; Skype interview, Cambridge, MA, 16 March 2020.
11. **Marc Grossman**, 18th Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs 2001–2005; Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs 1997–2000; United States Ambassador to Turkey 1995–1997; Zoom interview, Sweden, 3 April 2020.
12. **R. Nicholas Burns**, United States Ambassador to NATO 2001–2005; Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs 2005–2008; Zoom interview, Cambridge, MA, 24 March 2020.
13. **Victoria Nuland**, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs 2021–present; US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs 2013–2017; Spokesperson for the United States Department of State 2011–2013; United States Ambassador to NATO 2005–2008; principal deputy foreign policy adviser to Vice President Dick Cheney 2003–2005; Zoom interview, Cambridge, MA, 18 March 2020.
14. **John C. Kornblum**, US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs 1996–1997; telephone interview, 4 March 2020.
15. **Richard L. Morningstar**, Special Advisor to the President and the Secretary of State for Caspian Basin Energy Diplomacy; United States Ambassador to the European Union 1991–2001; telephone interview, 19 March 2020.
16. **Damon Wilson**, Senior Director for European Affairs at the National Security Council, 2007–2009; Director for Central, Eastern and Northern European Affairs at the National Security Council 2004–2006; Deputy Director of the Private Office of NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson 2001–2004; Skype interview, Cambridge, MA, 17 March 2020.
17. **David Kramer**, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2008–2009; Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs 2005–2008; special advisor to the Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs 2001–2003; Zoom interview, Cambridge, MA, 2 March 2020.
18. **Michael Carpenter**, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense with responsibility for Russia, Ukraine, Eurasia, the Balkans, and Conventional Arms Control; Foreign Policy Advisor to Vice President Joe Biden; Managing Director, Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement; telephone interview, 27 February 2020.
19. **David Price**, US Representative for North Carolina's 4th Congressional District; Zoom interview, Sweden, 18 May 2020.
20. **John Chicky**, Deputy Assistant Director, International Engagement at the Defense Technology Security Administration; Facetime interview, Cambridge, MA, 21 March 2020.
21. **Kurt D. Volker**, Deputy Director of NATO Secretary-General George Robertson's private office 1999–2001; United States Ambassador to NATO 2008–2009; Zoom interview, Sweden, 30 March 2020.
22. **Michael Anthony McFaul**, United States Ambassador to Russia 2012–2014; U.S. President Barack Obama's senior director of Russian and Eurasian affairs; Zoom interview, Sweden, 28 April 2020.
23. **William Courtney**, US Ambassador to Georgia 1995–1997; Skype interview, Cambridge, MA, 16 March 2020.
24. **Kenneth Spencer Yalowitz**, US Ambassador to Georgia 1998–2001; Skype interview, Cambridge, MA, 13 March 2020.
25. **Richard Miles**, US Ambassador to Georgia 2002–2005; answers provided in written form, by email, 29 March 2020.
26. **John F. Tefft**, US Ambassador to Russia 2014–2017; US Ambassador to Ukraine 2009–2013; US Ambassador to Georgia 2005–2009; Skype interview, Sweden, 31 March 2020.
27. **Ian C. Kelly**, US Ambassador to Georgia 2015–2018; US Ambassador to the OSCE 2010–2013; spokesperson for the US Department of State 2009–2010; Zoom interview, Sweden, 31 March 2020.
28. **Robert E. Hamilton**, retired US Air Force colonel; Eurasian Foreign Area officer; Skype interview, Sweden, 3 April 2020.
29. **Brigadier General Matthew L. Brand**, Deputy Chief of Staff for Strategic Plans and Policy, NATO Allied Command Transformation; Facetime interview, Cambridge, MA, 16 March 2020.
30. **John E. Herbst**, United States Ambassador to Uzbekistan 2000–2003; United States Ambassador to Ukraine 2003–2006; Skype interview, Cambridge, MA, 18 March 2020.
31. **Paul Stronski**, Director for Russia and Central Asia on the US National Security Council Staff, 2012–2014; US Foreign Service officer 2005–2012; Skype interview, Cambridge, MA, 18 March 2020.
32. **Kenneth Wollack**, former president of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI); Zoom interview, Sweden, 2 April 2020.

33. **Luke Coffey**, American political adviser and US Army veteran; Director, Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy; Skype interview, Cambridge, MA, 20 March 2020.
34. **Mark Mullen**, Director of the National Democratic Institute in Georgia 1997–2003; Zoom interview, Sweden, 22 May 2020.
35. **Lincoln Mitchell**, political analyst; affiliated with Arnold A. Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies, Columbia University; Facetime interview, Sweden, 9 April 2020.
36. **Alexander Cooley**, Claire Tow Professor of Political Science at Barnard College and Director of Columbia University's Harriman Institute; Zoom interview, Sweden, 7 April 2020.
37. **Marc Berhendt**, Director for Europe and Eurasia programs at Freedom House; Skype interview, Cambridge, MA, 19 March 2020.
38. **Stephen Jones**, Professor of Russian Studies, Mount Holyoke College; Zoom interview; Sweden, 5 May 2020.
39. **Thomas Garrett**, Secretary-General, Community of Democracies; Zoom interview, Cambridge, MA, 17 March 2020.
40. **Stephen B. Nix Esq.**, Eurasia Regional Director, International Republican Institute (IRI); Skype interview, Cambridge, MA, 17 March 2020.
41. **Current U.S. Foreign Service officer**, 2017–present; in-person interview, 15 August 2019.
42. **Current NATO senior official**, 2018–present; in-person interview; 3 August 2019.
43. **Former NATO senior official**, 1998–2005; Zoom interview, 26 February 2020.
44. **Former White House official**, 1997–2003; Zoom interview, 15 March 2020.

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