

WASHINGTON'S CHANGED TONE AND GEORGIA'S NATO HOPES

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Abstract

Long before the new administration appeared in the White House, Tbilisi had been in anticipation of the post-Bush era: would the US continue to support Georgia in the face of Moscow's growing determination to stop it from going West? Now, a year into Obama's presidency, a worldwide discourse provides diverging opinions on this tricky question. While some feel that Georgia's momentum has been lost for many years to come due to the "reset", optimists say that it is only the style, rather than the contents, that has been changed in the US-Georgia relations and that the new style may prove even more efficient in the long-term. This article studies the challenge faced by the Georgian government to keep the country pro-NATO but out of NATO, and examines Washington's approach to the Georgia issue under President Obama.

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, as Georgia became an independent state, its key priority has been to be accepted by the international community as its full-fledged member, both politically and economically. In order to attain this goal a long way of democratization and economic reforms were ahead. In the first place, Georgia had to get rid of rampant corruption and create an attractive business environment to invite much-needed foreign capital and escape poverty. This was critical because without domestic peace and national consensus it would be impossible to start destroying the Soviet-type governing bodies and build new political institutions.

On this hard road, the US has been one of the staunchest supporters for Georgia both politically and financially. Being the second biggest per capita recipient of the American financial aid, Georgia continues to enjoy Washington's non-recognition policy for breakaway Abkhazia and South Ossetia despite the growing pressure from Moscow. This important friendship, while inspiring hopes among

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the Georgian people for the prospects of NATO membership - a major foreign policy goal of the Saakashvili administration - has served as a catalyst for Russia's increasing aggression as well. Moscow has never conceived its ambitions to maintain or regain influence in the former Soviet space and never allow NATO to enter its "backyard."

It was during the tenure of George W. Bush that the US-Russia relations hit rock bottom. Back then, Bush's freedom and democratization agenda was at its height. And Georgia, being an exemplary country for the White House, was becoming an apple of discord between Washington and Moscow. Following the August war as well as the change in the US administration and subsequent "reset", the picture grew cloudier for Tbilisi.

As Obama tries to build good relations with Russia to settle the issues of Iran, energy, and non-proliferation, his handling of the anti-missile system in Central and Eastern European countries remains in the balance. Given this, many are increasingly concerned of the fact that all over the world's contested areas, an American tilt towards autocratic foes inevitably comes at the expense of freedom-loving friends. This calls into question Washington's future strategy on the Eurasian continent, including in Georgia. Given the fact that there is both a rational and moral dimension in the relationship of the United States and Georgia, the task for the Obama administration seems quite controversial and challenging.

Since the purpose of the given article is to analyze Washington's current attitude towards Georgia, the article explores the latest developments in the bilateral ties and their consequences at local, regional, and international level. Chapter 1 of this article gives insight into the present and previous nature of US-Georgia relations and focuses on their most outstanding achievements and failures. The same chapter introduces the NATO issue – perhaps the central point of US-Georgia relations at the time – and puts it under the scrutiny. Chapter 2 includes two sections: Section 1 offers highlights on Georgia's cooperation with the alliance, while the next one examines Georgia's chances as a candidate country in both contexts – together with Ukraine and without Ukraine. This chapter also discusses whether there are chances for repeating the Ukrainian scenario in Georgia – which is doing a U-turn on NATO -membership aspirations. Chapter 3, being the final one, attempts to show the political and security challenges that Georgia is facing at the time in the backdrop of developments in the former Soviet Union countries. Additionally, it illustrates why these challenges should matter for the White House and what should be done to respond to those challenges successfully.

1. The New Dimension in US-Georgia Relations under Obama

Opponents of the new administration lambaste President Obama for pursuing the role of “a disinterested promoter” in the international politics rather than overtly favouring democracies in their disputes with the great-power autocracies.¹ For instance, some think that the Obama administration’s strategy of advocating a “win-win” game in global politics instead of the post-cold war time “zero-sum” game, is doomed to failure. As to why this is so, Robert Kagan, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace writes: “either Russian influence grows, and the ability of neighbouring powers to resist it weakens. Or Russian ambitions for a sphere of special interest are checked, and Russia is unhappy.”

Signs of pessimism are shown in some local experts’ assessments. In his article “Obama and Georgia: A Year-Long Awkward Silence” young Georgian scholar George Khelashvili argues that since the change of the administration, US support has not gone further than just making statements.² Keeping things low-key, he explains, served a dual purpose – to shun Moscow’s annoyance and to make it clear that Washington did not betray Saakashvili.

“With the absence of a comprehensible American “grand strategy” towards the post-Soviet space, Georgia has been left out in the cold,” he writes. He also makes a gloomy conclusion: “From the perceived potential provider of security in the turbulent region of the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East, Georgia quickly turned into a strategic liability after the war with Russia in August 2008.”

However, there is a contrasting view that the substance of the US-Georgia relations remains quite dynamic. This group of experts and commentators contends that President Obama must offer a strong stand with regard to Georgia, or Tbilisi will be unable to stand up to the pressure from Moscow.

The report prepared by the Center for American Progress, which looks into the achievements and remaining challenges of the reset’s first year, is focused on this very accomplishment: “The new atmosphere of diminished antagonism played an important role in preventing several potentially damaging outcomes from occur-

¹ Kagan R., “Obama’s Year One: Contra”, *World Affairs Journal*, Jan-Feb 2010, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/articles/2010-JanFeb/full-Kagan-JF-2010.html>, 10/4/2010.

² Khelashvili G., “Obama and Georgia: A Year-Long Awkward Silence,” *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, no.13, 15 Feb 2010, p. 9.

ring, including a repeat of the conflict in Georgia on the anniversary of the August 2008 war.”³

Aleksander Rondeli, President of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS), the leading think tank in Tbilisi, is among the optimists and describes the current US-Georgia relations as being “more studious, more concentrated, less personified, less irritating for Russia and most importantly, productive.”⁴

A key change in US-Georgia relations is that they no longer have a personal nature, which they enjoyed in the previous years. Amid the growing unpopularity of President George W. Bush, this could have worked against Georgia at some point. Due to the low rating of President Bush, his “beacon of liberty” compliment for Georgia coined in 2005 would raise doubts among influential politicians and think tank figures. The 2007 crackdown of opposition demonstrators by the Saakashvili government, the announcement of the state of emergency, and shutting down the opposition’s key mouthpiece Imedi TV station only strengthened those doubts. By this time, Saakashvili had been perhaps the single leader worldwide who named a highway in his capital after President Bush.

“Saakashvili may be the last neoconservative – a twenty-first century Icarus who flew too close to the sun that was George W. Bush,” says Lincoln Mitchel, the Assistant Professor at Columbia University.⁵ His point is that personal factor has been as important as political issues in forming Washington’s relationship towards Georgia. This made Georgia a partisan issue in US politics, which is never good for any country.

For Rondeli too, the excessive personal factor in the bilateral relations could have been really harmful. “In the relationship between the United States and Russia Georgia has become a kind of third angle, which is not good for us. Georgia should not be used as a change in their relations. So the new administration’s [reserved] policy is a very wise choice for it serves as a cover for Georgia.” In the interview, Rondeli did not elaborate further but this is apparently a valuable point and speaks for itself once put in a wider context.

³ Charap S., “Assessing the “Reset” and the Next Steps for U.S. Russia Policy”, Center for American Progress, 14 April 2010, http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/04/assessing_reset.html, 25/4/2010.

⁴ Personal interview with Rondeli A., Tbilisi, 20/4/2010.

⁵ Mitchel L., “Georgia’s Story: Competing Narratives since the War,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, vol. 51, no. 4, Washington: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2009, p. 96.

A good illustration is the NATO angle of the US-Georgia relations: the US, while vehemently advocating granting MAP by NATO to Georgia, should have been aware that this was a risky gamble for Tbilisi and that it would take all the measures possible to prevent the worst from happening (MAP was a tool launched in 1999 by the NATO to assist countries seeking the membership. Even though participation in the MAP does not guarantee eventual membership, it is still seen as a precondition for finally joining the alliance).⁶

Since the international recognition of Kosovo in February 2008, Moscow has been threatening that “a domino effect” should be expected, referring to Georgia’s breakaway Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, in order to go ahead with its plans, the Kremlin needed to find a pretext. To add strain to the situation, two months later came the NATO Bucharest Summit. The Summit refused to grant MAP to Ukraine and Georgia but the 50-point document’s Article 23 announced: “We agreed today that these countries [Ukraine and Georgia] will become members of NATO.”⁷ This unprecedented announcement - never before had NATO stated it so overtly that a country would become a member – made Moscow realize that until the accession course became irreversible for Georgia and Ukraine, the process should be stopped somehow. Hence, Moscow decided to take advantage of this “window of opportunity:” By provoking Tbilisi to engage in an armed conflict in South Ossetia, the Kremlin was killing two birds with one stone - bringing an end to Georgia’s NATO prospects and finding a good pretext to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. The subsequent recognition of the breakaway republics gave Russia a green light to start building military bases in both regions as well as extend the Russian presence deep into the South Caucasus. Most importantly, taking into account NATO’s unwillingness to embrace countries that have military conflicts on their territory, by recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia officially, Moscow was making the conflict settlement “a mission impossible” for Georgia, thus creating a stumble block in the accession talks.

The above-described threats have been underestimated by the US administration, which was clearly demonstrated at the Bucharest Summit and that some months later resulted in the military conflict.

⁶ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *NATO press release: Membership Action Plan (MAP)*, 24 April 1999, <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/1999/p99-066e.htm>, 10/4/2010.

⁷ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Bucharest Summit Declaration*, Bucharest, 3 April 2008, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm, 15/3/2010.

“The only deterrent to Russia [not to attack Georgia] would have been a unified and powerful signal of NATO commitment that enlargement was indeed inevitable. ... I doubt that granting MAP in Bucharest by itself would not have sent that signal,” Ronald Asmus, Executive Director of the Brussels-based Transatlantic Center, an early and prominent advocate of NATO's Open Door Policy, writes in his book “A little War that Shook the World.”⁸

In fact, there have been three choices for the US to support Georgian membership during the Bucharest Summit: relentless lobbying for MAP, concrete steps to further deepen bilateral cooperation without granting MAP, and just verbal assurance. The US opted for the worst one – empty words rather than actions. For instance, an account of the Summit discussions suggests that in the run up to the summit a different compromise so called “MAP without MAP” was under discussion. That was a package that would have granted Georgia and Ukraine the practical benefits of the MAP program but with a different label: either the National Action Plan (NAP) or even the Georgian Action Plan (GAP). This option would have allowed Georgia to embark on a higher level of relations with NATO without having to further irritate Russia. On the contrary, Russia would have been feeling satisfied – it achieved the veto of the MAP issue.

It was not until after the war that Georgia received “MAP without MAP” benefits – the NAP as well as NATO-Georgia Commission and NATO Liaison Office in Tbilisi.⁹

2. NATO Membership versus Neutrality

2. 1. Georgia's way to NATO: highlights

The present tool for NATO to regulate its relationship with Georgia is the NATO-Georgia Commission (NGC),¹⁰ a body set up in September 2008 with the aim to oversee NATO assistance to Georgia in the aftermath of the August conflict with Russia as well as to oversee the process launched at the Bucharest Summit. In December 2008, the foreign ministers of the alliance agreed that, under the auspices

⁸ Asmus R, *A Little War that Shook the World*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 138.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

¹⁰ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Nato's Relations with Georgia*, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_38988.htm, 16/4/2010.

of the NGC, Georgia should develop an Annual National Programme. The latter replaced the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), which had guided NATO-Georgia partnership since 2004. Apart from the IPAP covering political, security, military, economic, social, and administrative fields, Georgia received the Intensified Dialogue (ID) format with the Alliance in 2006. In the framework of ID, Georgia started political consultations with the alliance on a number of priority issues including the ongoing reforms.

By that time, it had been more than a decade that Georgia started cooperation with the alliance. The highlights of the chronology are quite lengthy and intensive:

- In 1992, Georgia became a member of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC). Two years later, Georgia joined Partnership for Peace (PfP).
- Since 1995, cooperation has been underway in the education field under which Georgian experts undergo annual trainings in the NATO School in Oberammergau (Germany) and NATO Defence College in Rome (Italy).¹¹
- In 1996, Georgia submitted to NATO the first Individual Partnership Programme (IPP).
- In 1997, the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) was created and Georgia was among the founding members.
- In 1998, a diplomatic mission of Georgia to NATO was opened.
- In 1999, Georgia joined the Planning and Review Process (PARP) of the Partnership for Peace Programme, which helped Georgia to achieve interoperability with NATO and insure successful participation in the NATO-led peacekeeping operations.
- The year 2001 saw the launch of high-level regular political consultations with the NATO International Agency. The consultations were held between the Georgian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Head of the Political Directorate of NATO. High-level meetings are organized on a regular basis on the issues of arms control and disarmament within 26+1 format (26 member states of NATO plus Georgia). In 2001 and 2002, Georgia hosted large-scale multinational military trainings organized by NATO and the partner countries.
- At the 2002 NATO Summit in Prague, Georgia officially announced its aspiration to NATO membership and expressed its desire to participate in the IPAP.

¹¹ Information Centre on NATO, *Chronology of NATO-Georgia Relations*, <http://www.natoinfo.ge/?action=231&lang=eng>, 16/4/2010.

A significant area of cooperation is the assistance in NATO-led operations. Georgia is actively contributing to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, and also supports Operation Active Endeavour, NATO's anti-terrorist operation in the Mediterranean Sea.

Since 1999, Georgia has been participating in KFOR, a NATO-led international force responsible for peace and security in Kosovo. In 2004, a Georgian contingent took part in an ISAF operation in Afghanistan, where the Georgian troops' task was to ensure security during the election period.¹² In spring 2010, Georgia sent additional soldiers to Afghanistan – an infantry battalion without national caveats, who will be deployed together with the U.S. Marines in the province of Helmand. After sending the battalion, the number of Georgian troops in Afghanistan increased to 950, making Georgia the largest per capita contributor to the Afghan operation.¹³

2.2. With and without Ukraine: how strong is Georgia's standing?

The first stage of Georgia's way to NATO has been a play in duet with Ukraine. The change of power in Ukraine in early 2010 and new president Viktor Yanukovich's pledge to keep his country out of any alliance including the NATO, has left Georgia as a solo performer. Kiev's decision left many wondering whether Georgia's standing would remain unchanged. Taking into account all the valuable factors, obviously there are many pros and cons over the issue.

According to sceptics, Georgia's position has been corroded. Once discussed in a single context, all the Ukrainian advantages coupled with its own boons would help Georgia be viewed as a country capable of not only becoming a consumer of NATO-membership benefits but also a producer of those benefits. The idea is that a big and strategically located Ukraine with its Black Sea port and pipeline routes could have been a cogent argument for pro-enlargement members in convincing more hesitating countries in accepting Ukraine and Georgia in a group like it happened during the previous waves of enlargement. On the other hand, knowing that

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, *A Brief on the NATO-Georgia Relations*, Tbilisi, http://www.mfa.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&tsec_id=453, 14/4/2010.

¹³ *Civil Georgia*, Holbrooke: Georgian Afghan Deployment 'Extremely Important', 3 March 2010, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22046>, 14/4/2010.

NATO's two core principles when welcoming a new member is the willingness of the candidate country's population to be accepted as well as the government's record of democratization reforms, sailing in the same boat with Ukraine may prove fatal for Georgia. This is to say that popular support for NATO membership has never exceeded 20% in Ukraine, while the 2008 national referendum showed that 77% of Georgian population is in favour of joining the alliance.

Despite the former Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko's pro-Western orientation, he failed to carry out decisive political or economic reforms, curb corruption, and improve people's living standards. In contrast, Georgia had achieved considerable success in the transformation process. For instance, a big gap is illustrated by the latest available data of Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI), which is seen as the most trusted barometer measuring corruption in the public sector in 180 countries.

According to TI's 2009 report, Georgia improved its ranking to 4.1 from 3.9, placing it in the 66th position ahead of NATO and EU members Greece and Bulgaria, which both came in 71st.¹⁴ In comparison, Ukraine ended up far behind at 146th as it moved down to 2.2 from 2.5 in the previous ranking, thus sharing its position with Russia presently. At the same time, Georgia's performance was impressive compared with the other South Caucasus countries with Armenia and Azerbaijan ranking lower at 2.7 and 2.3, respectively.

Another example of success: between 2004 and 2010 Georgia moved from 112th to 11th place in an annual survey co-authored by the World Bank and International Finance Corporation (IFC), which rates countries on regulations that affect business climate from starting a business to closing it.¹⁵ This puts Georgia very close to the top ten, which includes countries such as Singapore, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Norway, etc. In contrast, Ukraine ranks 142nd in the rating, far behind not only Georgia but also Armenia and Azerbaijan, which came in 43rd and 38th, respectively. Critics of the Saakashvili government's economic policy are cautious about estimating the success on Doing Business, thinking the ranking is excessively focused on the façade of the reforms rather than the contents. However, while for them the progress on the rating may seem

¹⁴ Transparency International, *Corruption Perception Index 2009*, http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2009/regional_highlights, 20/3/2010.

¹⁵ Doing Business- the World Bank Group, *Doing Business 2010*, <http://www.doingbusiness.org/documents/fullreport/2010/DB10-full-report.pdf>, 20/3/2010.

overestimated, the growth dynamics of the Georgian economy confirms the positive trend: thanks to the corruption-free environment and business-friendly regulations, Georgia's GDP growth had reached a two-digit figure by 2008 versus 5% before the Rose Revolution.

Having these disparities in mind, it looks like Yanukovich has lifted a heavy burden off Georgia's shoulders. Now, when qualifying for NATO membership, Georgia will be responsible solely for its own shortcomings rather than for Ukraine's as well.

Another central point is Russia: losing both Ukraine and Georgia simultaneously and eventually as its sphere of influence would have been too much for Kremlin. After Ukraine gave up the idea to join, Russia will have relatively fewer reasons for aggression towards the enlargement concept. On the other hand, there might be a greater temptation for Moscow to keep feeding the anti-NATO sentiment in the South Caucasus as well.

How big are the chances for Russia to achieve this? During recent years there have been attempts by some political forces in Georgia to put the neutrality slogan on the agenda – saying no to NATO membership and making closer ties with Russia.¹⁶ However, as those forces never enjoyed substantial public support, the proposal never became an issue. For instance, Irina Sarishvili, who is affiliated with Georgia's wanted ex-security chief Igor Giorgadze, was the only presidential candidate opposing NATO accession in favour of the neutrality during the 2008 presidential elections and she garnered less than 1 % of votes.

“Russia wants to see Georgia be an independent, sovereign and neutral state with neighbourly relations with Russia,” Russian Ambassador to Georgia Vyacheslav Kovalenko said at the news conference in Tbilisi on 7 February 2007. However, back then, opposition groups did not embrace the message. It was only in 2009 that some formerly pro-NATO opposition figures started to call for neutrality and friendlier links with Russia. In fact, the August war gave momentum to this new rhetoric in Georgia.

Interestingly, this trend was observed not at the grassroots level but just among those radical and increasingly fragmented anti-government forces that refused to enter Parliament following the May 2008 election, instead calling for the unconditional resignation of Saakashvili and his government through street protests.

¹⁶ Civil Georgia, Russian Diplomat Outlines Conditions for Improving Ties, 6 Feb 2007, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=14575>, 24/4/2010.

They argue that the Saakashvili government's hostile attitude towards Moscow is to be blamed for the war and the occupation of Georgian territories. These politicians believe that Georgia's territorial integrity concerns can only be solved if Russia shows its kind will. This team includes Ex-PM Zurab Nogaideli, the leader of the opposition party Movement for Fair Georgia, who is a frequent guest of the Kremlin, has met with Putin and struck a cooperation deal with Russia's ruling United Russia Party. Another heavyweight is ex-parliamentary spokesperson Nino Burjanadze, as the leader of the opposition Democratic Movement-United Georgia party, who became the second Georgian politician to meet with the Russian PM following the August war.

Those Northern tours have not sparked a division in the nation. Among many Georgians these developments have only reinforced the government's earlier assumptions that Russia was behind the moral, if not financial, support for radical opposition appeals in Georgia. With all the diplomatic links broken with Moscow, Russia's occupying forces still on the Georgian territory and Moscow permanently breaching the 2008 ceasefire agreement, it is no surprise that the above-mentioned politicians have been labelled as losers, avengers, or simply traitors domestically.

Gia Nodia, an influential NGO personality, who joined the Saakashvili government as a Minister of Education for a while in 2008 said in his column in the Georgian magazine *Tabula* that he belongs to those people who sees signs of betrayal in the behaviour of Nogaideli and Burjanadze." He writes: "Both Nogaideli and Burjanadze play Russia's game consciously."¹⁷

Russian, as a language, is becoming increasingly rarely spoken among the young generation, while the role and level of English language skills has been on the rise over time. Young and middle age Georgians who are decision makers in the public, private, and civil sectors have already taken opportunity to be educated either in the United States or in Europe. For them, liberal ideas and democratic values are paramount and they would never compromise on them. Returning under the Russian influence would mean a quick farewell to the democratic change and future westernization prospects in Georgia.

Still, how irreversible Georgia's western choice will be is highly reliant on the local elite's performance in state building and pushing the economy ahead. It will

¹⁷ Nodia G., "What is a betrayal?" [*translated from Georgian*], *Tabula*, Tbilisi, 29 March-4 April 2010, p. 50-51.

be equally pressing as to whether the government succeeds in achieving a smooth recovery from the August war consequences and regain the occupied territories back under its sway. In addition, Georgia's ability to accomplish a peaceful transfer of power will play a critical role in increasing social and political cohesion domestically and shaping the country's image internationally.

3. Why Georgia's Challenges Matter

Georgia's future success is performance-based and at the same time it largely depends on the global geopolitical landscape. However, given the role of the US in international politics, the most important question will be whether Georgia really makes sense for the White House from a strategic point of view: Georgia is important in transportation of Caspian energy to western markets; it is a participant in the EU-initiated program called TRACECA or the "New Silk Road" (Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia), which is a key rival to the Russian transit network; Georgia lies in between two highly explosive territories such as the North Caucasus – Southern part of Russia as well as Iran and Afghanistan to Georgia's South-East border. Hence, whoever has control of Georgia and the South Caucasus, can receive valuable information in a timely manner on international terrorism, smuggling, nuclear proliferation, etc.

Another equally important factor is ideological, and it has a moral dimension: Georgia is one of the successful states in the Caucasus pursuing the pro-democratic change. In order to secure its political sovereignty and independent choice Georgia crucially needs protection by the international community; NATO, whose policy is largely shaped by the US, has promised to keep its door open for those who are willing and eligible to enter.

"In 2009, a great power does not show strength by dominating or demonizing other countries. The days when empires could treat sovereign states as pieces on a chessboard are over," Obama said in his 2009 address to Moscow's New Economic School audience.¹⁸ "State sovereignty must be a cornerstone of international order. Just as all states should have the right to choose their leaders, states must have the

¹⁸ *RFE/RL*, On Second Day of Visit, Obama Addresses Civil Society Issues in Russia, 7 July 2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/On_Second_Day_Of_Visit_Obama_Addresses_Civil_Society_Issues_In_Russia/1771673.html, 10/4/2010.

right to borders that are secure, and to their own foreign policies. That is true for Russia, just as it is true for the United States. Any system that cedes those rights will lead to anarchy. That is why we must apply this principle to all nations – and that includes nations like Georgia and Ukraine.”

This address seen as Washington’s key foreign-policy speech in Russia clearly demonstrated that while the White House planned “the reset” of relations with Russia, no green light should be expected for the Kremlin’s “sphere of influence” policy.

An unfolding reality in some of the former SU countries, however, shows that a promise for the newly independent states is on the wane. The recent political developments in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, which brought Moscow-friendly governments to power, has made it clear that the Kremlin obviously sees little resistance to give up meddling with its neighbours’ internal politics.

Kiev has struck a deal with the Kremlin to extend the lease term for Russia’s naval base on the Black Sea port of Sevastopol in exchange for cheaper gas, something that the previous Ukrainian government had harshly resisted. On the other front, Kyrgyzstan’s interim leadership has received a pledge of 50 million dollars in aid from Moscow, which will guarantee the pro-Moscow policy in the country.¹⁹ Moreover, commenting on the ouster of the Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev predicted “the possibility of similar scenarios in ex-Soviet states or other countries.”²⁰ In Tbilisi, this claim has been widely interpreted as the Kremlin’s hint to its covert role in the developments in Kyrgyzstan.²¹

Now, as leaders of Colour Revolutions – the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan – have been ousted and former Polish President Lech Kaczynski, the most steadfast supporter of the new democracies in Europe is no longer alive, Saakashvili has all the reasons to feel lonelier than ever before.

When it comes to either Georgia’s NATO aspirations or establishing closer ties with the European Union, the Baltic States and Poland have a critical role

¹⁹ *Reuters*, Russia pledges \$50 mln to Replenish Kyrgyz Coiffers, 14 April 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSLDE63D1YH20100414>, 21/4/2010.

²⁰ *RIA Novosti*, Kyrgyz scenario may repeat in other states – Medvedev, 16 April 2010, <http://en.rian.ru/russia/20100416/158603097.html>, 22/4/2010.

²¹ *RFE/RL*, Kyrgyz Interim Government Slams Saakashvili Spokesperson’s Statement [translated from Georgian], 2 May 2010, <http://www.tavisupleba.org/archive/geo-news/20100412/1001/1001.html?id=2009647>, 22/4/2010.

in helping Georgia to win the old Europe's heart. In recent years, Warsaw and Moscow have been at odds over a number of issues including NATO enlargement, anti-missile shield, and gas pipelines. However, now media is speculating about the possible rapprochement. Those speculations make sense in the following context: Poland's centrist Prime Minister Donald Tusk, an opponent of the late president's conservative politics, favours cooperative relations with Russia. Given the country's impressive economic performance under him, the PM's presidential candidate the acting President Bronislaw Komorowski has real chances to win the race. Whether the next Polish president will be as supportive of Georgia as his predecessor is an open question.

Taking all the above-described political developments into account, Russia is celebrating a sheer triumph.

"It's not just about abandoning your ally Georgia. No, Russia is asking the U.S. to give back the Soviet sphere of influence," Saakashvili said in an interview with TIME.²²

International analysts, too, taking in mind the recent developments on the Eurasian continent, say Georgia has been left all alone, while mentioning that Russia is becoming a priority issue for Washington. For them, a classic example of this trend is President Obama's May 10 message to the Congress requesting support for a nuclear cooperation pact with Russia. Obama said: "the situation in Georgia need no longer be considered an obstacle to proceeding with the proposed Agreement."²³ In the aftermath of the August war, the Bush administration froze the treaty, explaining that Russia's actions were "incompatible with peaceful relations with its sovereign and democratic neighbour, Georgia."

However, this estimation is exaggerated because the nuclear issue is quite a different question. It is indeed only the style that has been changed in the bilateral relations. The strongest argument for this is an op-ed by Vice President Joe Biden, published before his European trip.²⁴ In the op-ed, Biden touches upon the ongoing US-EU dialog on the future of the European security. The peace is actually a

²² *Time*, Russia Reclaims Influence, U.S. does not Object, 23 April 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1983785,00.html?xid=rss-topstories>, 21/4/2010.

²³ The White House, Message from the President Regarding a Peaceful Nuclear Agreement with Russia, 10 May 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/message-president-regarding-a-peaceful-nuclear-agreement-with-russia> 15/5/2010

²⁴ The White House Blog, *Advancing Europe's Security*, 5 May 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2010/05/05/advancing-europes-security> 8/5/2010.

late response to the Russian concept of a new European security concept voiced in 2008. The latter's key idea was to veto NATO's enlargement and legalize Russia's spheres of influence. Now, while reaching the nuclear cooperation pact with Russia, the White House is warning Russia that it has to abide by "certain shared rules." Biden's op-ed reads: "The threat or use of force has no place in relations among European powers. Nor can we allow large countries to have vetoes over the decisions of smaller ones. And most importantly, we cannot permit the re-establishment of spheres of influence in Europe."²⁵

Therefore, there is the "reset" along with its positive outcomes for the US and Russia, including the nuclear pact, but at the same time, there is the promise for Georgia that Washington will not compromise at the expense of Georgia. It is not ruled out that it will be Moscow rather than Washington, which will have to make a compromise during the dialog on the future European security.

Influential experts' policy recommendations for the Obama administration are other promising signs in this regard. Those recommendations show that the White House is in the process of shaping a revised approach to the Georgia issue, which can prove more efficient in the changed environment. For instance, even a think tank that favours the "reset" - the Center for American Progress - has recognized the Obama administration's failure to hold Russia abide by its international commitments. Offering advice to address the lingering challenges between the US and Russia, the think tank recommends that the administration should "Develop an action plan for Russian compliance with the August 2008 cease-fire agreement with Georgia."²⁶

The need for developing "a long-term policy for moving Georgia towards Euro-Atlantic Institutions" is also a key recommendation for Senator Richard Lugar's Report to the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.²⁷ According to Lugar, the US must raise the profile of diplomatic efforts to alleviate the deep tensions remaining between Georgia and Russia. He points to the need to strengthen Georgia's military capacity, noting that while Russia has threatened to sanction entities involved in arms deals with Georgia, Moscow has reached an "unprecedented"

²⁵ The White House Blog (note 25)

²⁶ Charap, (note 4).

²⁷ Lugar R., *A Report to the Committee of Foreign Relations "Striking the Balance: U.S. Policy and Stability in Georgia,"* Washington, 22 Dec 2009, <http://lugar.senate.gov/sfrc/pdf/Georgia.pdf>, 25/4/2010.

deal with the NATO member France over the purchase of a Mistral-class assault ship. Interestingly, Russian Navy commander Admiral Vladimir Vysotskiy has boasted that during the August 2008 conflict “a ship like that would have allowed the Black Sea Fleet to accomplish its mission in 40 minutes, not 26 hours, which is how long it took us.”²⁸

It has to be taken into account that the new Russian military doctrine, which sees NATO's eastward enlargement as the key external military hazard facing Russia, announces Russia's right to “promptly” use military force beyond its borders “for the purpose of the protection of the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens as well as for the preservation of international peace and security.”²⁹

The number of Russian citizens on the vulnerable territories beyond the Russian frontiers is quite big. Ever since Russia helped South Ossetia and Abkhazia to secede from Georgia in the early 1990s, Kremlin has been desperate in distributing Russian passports to the people living on those territories, a far-reaching strategy for future political manoeuvring.

Therefore, Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as the newly occupied territories of Georgia continue to be highly explosive areas: international observers or non-governmental organizations have no access to South Ossetia, which is only a 45 minute drive from the capital Tbilisi; the Russian troops, instead of pulling back to pre-war positions and cutting the number of troops to pre-war levels in compliance with the French-brokered 2008 ceasefire, are building permanent military bases in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. While Georgia's lethal defence weaponry were damaged during the August war, the US has not provided any new supply under Russian diplomatic pressure.

Presently, Georgia lacks fundamental power for territorial defence, and stability along the administrative border with South Ossetia. The continuation of the status quo, according to Lugar's document, appears to ensure that Georgia will not only have difficulty providing for its own territorial defence needs, but “remain susceptible to the internal strife and external manipulation that often accompany such national insecurity.”³⁰

²⁸ David J. Smith, “Stop France Arming Russia,” *Georgian Daily*, 10 January 2010, http://georgiandaily.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&cid=16381&Itemid=132 10/4/2010.

²⁹ The Administration of President of Russian Federation, *Military Doctrine of Russian Federation*, Moscow, 5 Feb 2010, http://news.kremlin.ru/ref_notes/461, 10/4/2010.

³⁰ Lugar R., (note 28)

The importance of a “strong, independent, sovereign and democratic Georgia, capable of responsible self-defence” is also outlined in the United States-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership. Such a Georgia, according to the document, “contributes to the security and prosperity not only of all Georgians, but of a Europe whole, free and at peace.”³¹

Conclusions

A year into the Obama era, even though doubts linger about Washington’s strategy regarding Georgia, the recent developments show that the US maintains both political and economic support for Tbilisi.

Obviously, there are signs that Washington will try to engage Russia in creating new European security institutions and mechanisms but the red lines have been already drawn – a compromise will not be made at the expense of Georgia. This suggests that once the United States and Europe show concentrated efforts to support sovereign nations, including Georgia, Moscow will have to make concessions. In the first place, this concerns Georgia’s NATO membership aspirations. Therefore, it is highly recommended that United States show a stronger determination to help Georgia receive MAP.

On its part, Russia will keep trying to help change the Saakashvili administration and support a friendlier regime to take the power. However, regardless of how robust Moscow’s resolve is to see regime change and the subsequent change of foreign policy priorities in Georgia, a u-turn on this issue is hardly imaginable.

However, the Georgian government should make all efforts to insure internal peace and stability, showing a firm determination to strengthen democratic institutions because this is the key to joining the western alliances. Ensuring that free and fair elections, rather than violence or street demonstrations, are the prime tool for changing the government is paramount.

The poor reality that personal factor is dominant on the foreign policy front is due to the fragility of Georgia’s political institutions and political parties. However, given how challenging the way is ahead for Georgia, the next leader’s personality will again have a major influence on the country’s future strategic choice and

³¹ U.S. Department of State, *United States-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership*, 9 Jan 2009, <http://www.america.gov/st/texttransenglish/2009/January/20090109145313eafas0.2139093.html#ixzz0mcMincSM>, 20/3/2010.

international support for the country. For this reason, both the ruling party and opposition forces should be very careful in nominating their candidates for the 2013 presidential elections, the time when President Saakashvili's term in office will expire.

What is most important for Georgia is that it needs an umbrella of external democratic forces in order to stand up to domineering Russia, thereby being capable of continuing to build fully functional democratic institutions, advancing economic reforms, and maintaining national security. Therefore, apart from continuing the non-recognition policy, the US should develop a long-term policy to help Georgia move towards Euro-Atlantic Institutions.