

GEORGIA AND THE NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION (NATO) – THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTNERSHIP AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

Abstract

The North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Georgia have been partners for almost 30 years during which the country has significantly enhanced its security and defense structures. Not only does partnership with NATO help Georgia to strengthen its security but it also encourages the country to improve institutional resilience and spread democratic values to increase its compatibility vis-à-vis NATO. Integration in the Euro-Atlantic structures has become especially prevalent in the Georgian public discourse after Russia's illegal and brutal invasion of Ukraine when Georgia's security architecture was put under question. Therefore, due to the revived interest in the topic of NATO-Georgia partnership, this article discusses the importance of practical and political cooperation between Georgia and NATO and analyses the importance of NATO's role in strengthening Georgia's security and defense.

Keywords: security, defense, Euro-Atlantic structures, NATO, Georgia.

Russia's brutal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has fundamentally altered the Euro-Atlantic security architecture that was formed after the Cold War (Polyakova 2023). The war in Ukraine and turbulent geopolitical crises have exacerbated security dilemmas and put additional strain on Black Sea countries, such as Georgia (Flanagan 2020). Georgia, whose 20% of territories is currently illegally occupied by the Russian Federation, clearly saw the dangers of Russia's expansionism, which is why strengthening security and defense institutions has become existentially important and the highest priority for the country's national interests (Kakachia 2022). Strengthening of Georgia's security and defense systems and ensuring institutional sustainability is connected with Georgia-NATO relations, the importance of which has become particularly relevant in the current period (Temnycky 2022).

Foundations of the NATO-Georgia Cooperation

Integration in the Euro-Atlantic structures is a constitutional right for Georgia which is also codified in article 78 of the Georgian constitution (Constitution of Georgia 1995)¹. In addition to Georgia's desire to join the European Union (EU), the article explicitly mentions Georgia's aspirations for joining NATO.

The foundations of the NATO-Georgia partnership were laid when Georgia gained independence from the USSR and started becoming a sovereign, independent player on the global political chessboard. Georgia's foreign policy in this period mainly revolved around fostering deeper relationships between Euro-Atlantic institutions.

¹ Article 78 of the Georgian constitution: "The constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competencies to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization."

The relationship between NATO and Georgia was especially broadened and deepened in 1994 when Georgia joined NATO's Partnership for Peace program. In the context of NATO-Georgia cooperation, the 2002 NATO Prague Summit was especially significant as the then President of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze vocalized for the first time Georgia's desire to join NATO (Information Centre on NATO and EU 2024). The partnership was moved to a higher level during the so-called Rose Revolution when Georgia began implementing more ambitious and pro-Western reforms (Wilson 2014). NATO's 2008 Bucharest Summit was historic in this regard as the Allies officially welcomed Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO, noting that the country would eventually become a member of the Alliance. Political assistance continued even after the war in 2008, when Russia invaded Georgia and occupied 20% of its territories. In the following year, the NATO-Georgia Commission was formed which created a framework for political dialogue between Georgia and NATO and encouraged the country to advance on its Euro-Atlantic reforms (NATO 2024). In this regard, the 2022 NATO Summit in Madrid is also noteworthy as the Allies have underscored the difficult security environment resulting from Russia's war in Ukraine and endorsed a set of tailored support measures for Georgia, as one of NATO's partners most directly affected by external threats and interference (NATO 2022).

Existing Partnership Between NATO and Georgia

Cooperation with NATO not only helps Georgia to deepen its political partnership with one of the most important military and political organizations, but it also encourages the country to develop practical cooperation tools. In this regard, the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP) is especially emphasized. The SNGP initiative was established in 2014 during the Wales Summit and aims to strengthen Georgia's defense capabilities and develop closer security cooperation and interoperability with NATO (NATO 2016). SNGP especially helps Georgia in the areas of security and defense system reforms, enhancing Georgia's resilience, encouraging transparency, and strengthening Georgia's defense capabilities in line with NATO standards to help the country advance in its preparation for NATO membership (Information Centre on NATO and EU 2024). Additionally, SNGP helps Georgia to enhance its cyber and maritime security domains (NATO 2016). Furthermore, NATO-Georgia cooperation is important as it allows the country to participate in NATO-led operations and military exercises (Paul and Maisuradze 2021). For instance, the Georgian infantry platoon joined the NATO-led peacekeeping mission- "Kosovo Forces" (KFOR) and participated in the peace-support operations. Georgia was also one of the largest non-NATO troop contributors to the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (NATO 2024). Additionally, Georgia is a participant in the initiative Active Endeavour, the purpose of which is to help defend and protect against terrorist activities in the Mediterranean Sea. Georgian coast guard officers also participated in NATO's Sea Guardian operation, which as the Ministry of Interior underscored, highlights Georgia's contribution to the Euro-Atlantic Security (NATO 2024). Following the previously mentioned cooperation between Georgia and NATO, in 2022 Georgia was also designated as the operational maritime security partner for the Sea Guardian operation- the first non-NATO country to receive such a status (Civil Georgia 2023).

Discussing the Importance of NATO with the Framework of Realism and Social Constructivism

NATO's importance for Georgia can also be discussed with the framework of theories of international relations, such as realism and social constructivism. According to realism, the main actors in the international system are sovereign states, whose purpose is survival and maximizing one's power. Therefore, for realist thinkers, states seek power and security in the international security environment characterized by anarchy. Realism posits that security and survival are precisely the factors that shape and affect a country's foreign policy choices (Collins 2022). Taking the realist perspective into account, strengthening partnerships with such security alliances as NATO is critically important for a small state such as Georgia as it gives the country specific political and practical resources for enhancing its security. Additionally, partnership with NATO helps Georgia to develop credible deterrence structures, which is especially important in a turbulent geopolitical context (Malek 2008). This is all the more important against the backdrop of Russia's invasion of Ukraine when maritime security, cybersecurity, energy security, and institutional resilience became the main priorities.

Furthermore, NATO's importance for Georgia can be analyzed with the framework of social constructivism. according to this school of thought, objective reality does not exist apart from an individual. In other words, the world is constructed with social interactions and the subjective experience of individuals. Consequently, social constructivism places its emphasis on ideas, values, interactions, and subjective perceptions (Jackson 2016). By analyzing NATO-Georgia cooperation within this framework, it becomes clear that NATO encourages the country to implement democratic reforms and uphold its constitutionally guaranteed Euro-Atlantic aspirations. NATO also helps Georgia to enhance its transparency and develop its institutions in accordance with democratic principles (Kakachia 2024). Therefore, this partnership helps Georgia to develop its security structures as well as continue advancing on its pro-Western foreign policy course (Temnycky 2022).

Conclusion

NATO is one of the most important and strongest political and military organizations whose main purpose is to uphold member states' security. NATO is also an integral part of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. NATO-Georgia partnership flourished after Georgia gained independence and expressed its willingness to join the EU and NATO. Since Georgia gained its independence, NATO's political and practical tools have helped Georgia to strengthen its security and undertake reforms for enhancing institutional resilience and defense. Therefore, partnership with NATO is paramount for a small country like Georgia, which is currently caught between the great power competition in the Black Sea region. By deepening relations with NATO and participating in NATO-led military operations, Georgia is bolstering its institutional resilience, security structures, and deterrence, which is especially critical in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and regional instabilities in the South Caucasus. Consequently, Georgia should continue close cooperation with the alliance and undertake necessary reforms for deepening its partnership and interoperability with NATO.

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