



**The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Georgia:
Relations, the Afghanistan Peacekeeping Mission,
Prospects and Challenges**

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Abstract

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restoration of Georgia's independence in 1991, one of the primary priorities of the country's foreign policy has been integration into NATO. Georgia has undertaken numerous significant steps toward this goal. The country shares NATO's core principles, which are based on democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law.

Georgia's Euro-Atlantic course aims to ensure national security and sovereignty. Due to its geopolitical location, Georgia's sovereig-

nty, security, and territorial integrity have consistently faced serious challenges. Consequently, the country has sought security guarantees within the Euro-Atlantic space.

Georgia holds a strategically important position in the region for both European allies and the United States, serving as a key transit corridor for energy resources between East and West. Integration into the Euro-Atlantic space would play a crucial role in counterbalancing potential aggression from Russia and in addressing the threat of radical Islamist extremism at the international level.

Keywords: Georgia, NATO, partnership, summit, NACC, IPAP, ANP, MAP, ISAF.

Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is a military alliance composed of 32 member states, whose primary objective is to ensure the freedom and security of its members through both political and military means. NATO enlargement is a significant process based on Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which establishes an open-door policy for any state willing and able to meet the requirements for membership. Since its founding in 1949, NATO has expanded from 12 to 32 member states.

Relations between NATO and Georgia date back to 1991, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restoration of Georgia's independence. In pursuit of NATO membership, Georgia has undertaken numerous important steps, including joining the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC), transitioning to the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), actively participating in NATO-led military operations, and implementing a series of domestic reforms

aimed at aligning the country with NATO standards. Integration into NATO remains a central priority of Georgia's foreign and security policy.

Georgia places great importance on NATO's role in strengthening national security and stability. NATO integration is primarily perceived as a guarantee of stability for the country. However, a portion of Georgia's territory remains occupied and recognized by Russia, and the current regional environment is characterized by heightened tensions, particularly in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war. Under such conditions, Georgia requires a strong ally and security guarantor to ensure its stable development and long-term security.

In light of ongoing global political developments and emerging challenges, security issues have become increasingly salient. Small states are often compelled to continuously struggle to preserve their sovereignty. Consequently, Georgia aspires to become a member of NATO and to integrate into its collective security system. NATO possesses the capacity and resources necessary to contribute significantly to safeguarding Georgia's security and maintaining regional stability amid persistent and complex threats.

Discussion

Relations between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Georgia date back to 1991, when the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) was established within the framework of NATO.

Membership in the NACC provided Georgia with the opportunity to share and adopt the Alliance's experience in the development of political, economic, and military democratic institutions, and subsequently to implement this experience in its own national development. Initially, due to the unstable political situation in Georgia, NATO leadership refrained from admitting the country to the NACC in

early 1992. However, on June 5, 1992, Georgia officially joined the organization. This date is considered the starting point of NATO–Georgia cooperation.

From 1993 onwards, NATO representatives began visiting Georgia to assess the regional situation. The first delegation arrived in Tbilisi on June 12, 1993, and remained until June 18. Shortly thereafter, on June 23, 1993, the Head of State of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze, visited NATO headquarters (Chitadze, 2008:245).

Georgia joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program on March 23, 1994. Later, on May 1, 1997, the Georgian Parliament ratified the agreement regulating the status of armed forces between NATO member states and partner countries participating in the program (Chitadze, 2008:248).

On February 11–12, 1997, NATO Secretary General Javier Solana visited Georgia. During this visit, he met with President Eduard Shevardnadze, and discussions focused on NATO–Georgia cooperation, as well as the political and economic situation in the country and possible solutions.

On April 22, 1998, Georgia opened its diplomatic mission to NATO, and the Georgian Ambassador presented credentials to the Secretary General of the Alliance. At the NATO Prague Summit (November 21–22, 2002), Georgia officially declared its aspiration to join the Alliance. To support this process, in 2003, by Presidential Decree No. 235, the National Security Council for Euro-Atlantic Integration was established (Chitadze, 2008:250).

NATO–Georgia relations deepened significantly after the Rose Revolution. On April 7, 2004, at the 26+1 meeting held in Brussels, President Mikheil Saakashvili presented the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) to NATO’s Secretary General. At the Istanbul Summit (June 28–29, 2004), Georgia officially joined the IPAP initiative, and

on October 29, 2004, the next phase of Euro-Atlantic integration began with the implementation of the IPAP (Chitadze, 2008, p. 250).

On September 21, 2006, at an informal meeting of NATO member states' foreign ministers in New York, a decision was made to launch an Intensified Dialogue with Georgia on membership issues. This step demonstrated NATO's support for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations and increased the likelihood of future membership. At the Riga Summit in 2006, Georgia was the only non-member state invited as a guest, and the summit highlighted the country's ongoing reforms and progress within the Intensified Dialogue framework (Chitadze, 2008“254).

A particularly significant milestone in NATO-Georgia relations was the Bucharest Summit (April 2–3, 2008). Georgia had high expectations of advancing to a new stage of cooperation, specifically receiving a Membership Action Plan (MAP). However, neither Georgia nor Ukraine was granted MAP at that time. Shortly after the summit, in August 2008, the Russia-Georgia war broke out, which entered history as the “Five-Day War.”

In August 2010, based on a decision of the North Atlantic Council, a new format of military cooperation was established, and a NATO-Georgia Annual National Program (ANP) was developed, defining priority areas of cooperation (Seperteladze, 2018:18). Among the key NATO-supported initiatives implemented in Georgia is the Professional Development Program (PDP), launched in 2009, aimed at enhancing the professional skills of representatives from the Ministry of Defense and the broader security sector through training and educational programs.

Additionally, the Sachkhere Mountain Training School, established on August 14, 2006, was granted the status of a NATO Partnership Training and Education Center in 2010. At the 2012 Chicago

Summit, the Smart Defense Initiative was introduced, and in 2016, the Defence Institution Building School was established (Seperteladze, 2018:20–23).

An essential component of NATO–Georgia relations is Georgia’s participation in NATO-led military operations. This cooperation began in 1993, following Georgia’s involvement in the Partnership for Peace program. Between 1999 and 2008, Georgian armed forces participated in peacekeeping operations in Kosovo (KFOR). The first Georgian platoon was deployed in the town of Mamusha as part of a Turkish battalion. From 2003 onwards, Georgia increased its presence, deploying a 150-strong company to Prizren under German command, with rotations occurring every seven months. Georgian forces remained in Kosovo until 2008.

Particularly noteworthy is Georgia’s contribution to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan. Georgia participated continuously from 2004 to 2014. The primary task of the reinforced Georgian units was to ensure security during Afghanistan’s presidential elections. Georgian forces conducted patrols, search operations, checkpoint control, and training of Afghan artillery units.

Through its participation in ISAF, Georgia demonstrated that it is not merely a consumer of security but an active contributor to international peacekeeping missions. Prior to deployment, Georgian troops underwent six months of intensive training in Georgia, led by instructors from the United States Marine Corps. Between 2010 and 2013, two infantry battalions were deployed in Helmand Province, while additional units operated in Kabul under French and U.S. command. In 2011, Georgian artillery instructors trained Afghan artillery personnel.

Since January 2015, NATO has launched a new mission in Afghanistan - the **Resolute Support Mission (RSM)**. Within this framework, the Alliance continued to support the strengthening of the Afghan National Security Forces, enabling Afghanistan to independently maintain security and stability within its territory. In preparation for participation in this mission, Georgian units underwent four months of intensive pre-deployment training, led by instructors from the United States Marine Corps.

In April 2021, following the decision adopted at the North Atlantic Council Ministerial meeting on Afghanistan regarding the retrograde of forces participating in the Resolute Support Mission, Georgian units fully withdrew from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Between 2004 and 2021, within more than 100 rotations conducted at various levels (ISAF and RSM), over 30,000 Georgian servicemen participated in international missions in Afghanistan. The Georgian Defence Forces sustained significant losses in these operations: 32 servicemen were killed in the fight against terrorism, and several hundred were wounded.

Through participation in NATO-led peacekeeping operations, Georgia has made a substantial contribution to strengthening international security. This engagement has demonstrated that Georgia is not merely a consumer of security but an active contributor to global peacekeeping efforts. The involvement of the Georgian Armed Forces in international missions represents a key instrument in the implementation of the country's foreign policy priorities.

This raises an important question: **how significant is NATO integration for Georgia?**

First and foremost, the issue must be examined from a geostrategic perspective, particularly in the context of Georgia–Russia relations, occupied territories, and the ongoing process of “borderization”.

Full NATO membership would play a crucial role in deterring potential aggression from Russia. Furthermore, the growing presence of extremist Islamist groups in the region represents an additional security challenge, and NATO membership would enhance Georgia's capacity to counter such threats. Thus, NATO integration can be regarded as a vital guarantee of the country's future and its territorial integrity.

Economic factors must also be taken into account. Meeting NATO standards requires sustained socio-economic development. NATO member states place strong emphasis on human rights protection and the development of democratic institutions; therefore, integration into NATO would further promote these values in Georgia.

However, Georgia faces numerous challenges on its path toward NATO membership. One of the most significant is the issue of national security. In the 1990s, externally supported separatist movements led to armed conflicts, resulting in the de facto separation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the loss of Georgian government control over these territories. The August 2008 war remains a defining event in this context.

Prior to the war, in early 2008, as discussions on Georgia's NATO membership intensified, relations between NATO and Russia deteriorated significantly. Russian authorities openly declared that they would respond to Georgia's potential NATO accession with military measures. Vladimir Putin expressed support for the de facto governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which had appealed to Russia for assistance.

Tensions escalated in July 2008, when armed incidents in the South Ossetian conflict zone resulted in casualties. On July 7-8, de facto authorities detained four Georgian servicemen, and on the same day of their release, Russian aircraft violated Georgian airspace. By

late July, the situation had further deteriorated, with explosions near Tskhinvali and the village of Avnevi coinciding with large-scale Russian military exercises near the border.

The situation also worsened in Abkhazia. On July 9, clashes between Georgian and Abkhaz armed forces in the Upper Kodori Valley resulted in injuries on both sides. From July 1, Abkhaz authorities closed the Enguri Bridge, a vital connection for local populations.

On August 1, two remotely controlled explosive devices detonated near a Georgian police vehicle, seriously injuring five officers. On the same day, South Ossetian forces opened fire on Georgian villages, injuring civilians and police personnel.

Full-scale hostilities began on August 7, 2008, between Georgian forces and South Ossetian separatists, and on August 8, Russia openly intervened in the conflict. After several days of fighting, Russian and separatist forces advanced, while Russian aviation conducted airstrikes on Georgian cities. The conflict expanded further when Abkhaz and Russian forces opened a second front in the Kodori Gorge.

A ceasefire agreement was brokered on August 12, 2008, with mediation by Nicolas Sarkozy. Georgia signed the agreement on August 15, and Russia on August 16. Despite the agreement, hostilities and bombardments continued. On August 26, Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, a move widely condemned by the international community.

According to official data, as of September 25, 2008, the war resulted in the deaths of 168 Georgian military personnel, 16 police officers, and 188 civilians.

As a result of the conflict, Russian military forces remain stationed in the occupied territories, and the process of “creeping occupation” continues. The 2008 war can be interpreted as a signal from Rus-

sia to the international community regarding its opposition to NATO enlargement near its borders.

This stance became even more pronounced following developments in Ukraine in 2014 and especially after February 24, 2022, when large-scale military operations began on Ukrainian territory. NATO and European Union member states have openly supported Ukraine's sovereignty, providing substantial military and financial assistance, while Russia has increasingly been perceived as an aggressive actor in the international system.

Georgia's integration into the Euro-Atlantic community is closely linked to internal developments, including economic readiness, protection of human rights, the effectiveness of civil society, governance institutions, judicial reforms, and military modernization.

Recent regional developments, particularly the Russia-Ukraine war, have somewhat slowed the intensity of NATO-Georgia relations, as the Alliance's primary focus has shifted toward Ukraine. Nevertheless, Georgia remains one of NATO's key partners in the South Caucasus. While some scholars argue that neutrality may be the most advantageous position for small states, Georgia's geopolitical realities make neutrality an unreliable guarantee of national security.

Ultimately, Georgian society has clearly defined the country's foreign policy orientation and has chosen the path of integration into NATO.

Conclusion

Given the current volatile security environment in the region, the preservation of peace and stability has become increasingly important for Georgia. Under these conditions, strengthening cooperation with the Alliance and enhancing security in the Black Sea region in all possible formats are of paramount importance. Further NATO enlargement in the Black Sea region represents one of the most adequate

responses to existing regional threats. Accordingly, it is essential for Georgia to maintain positive momentum in its path toward membership.

At the same time, when discussing NATO–Georgia relations, an important question arises regarding the Alliance’s own interests in Georgia. First and foremost, NATO’s interests are determined by Georgia’s geopolitical location. The Alliance has significant strategic interests both in the Black Sea region and in the South Caucasus. Its engagement in the South Caucasus is also driven by energy projects, particularly those related to the transportation of energy resources from East to West through Georgian territory.

In addition, NATO has important military–strategic interests in the Caucasus region, taking into account military, geographical, and political factors. The Alliance’s military planning is based on the principle of “rapid response,” which means the ability to conduct military operations promptly when necessary. In this regard, the South Caucasus occupies a position of considerable importance in NATO’s strategic calculations.

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