



# USA Foreign Policy in Transition: How a Biden Administration Impacts Georgia

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The dramatic 2020 USA presidential elections are finally over with Joe Biden having defeated Donald Trump.<sup>i</sup> A new administration means new conditions for USA foreign relations in general, and of importance to us, Georgia. This piece focuses on the revitalization of traditional alliances, the promotion of democratic values beyond the USA, and Biden's expected stance with Russia, all of which impact strategic relations between Washington and Tbilisi.

Biden's "America Back" plan (Biden 2020; Manson and Weaver 2020) may open up new opportunities for the USA's small, strategic partners such as Georgia. Restoring USA's currently damaged relations with the transatlantic community will bring stability to Tbilisi and allow it to continue its commitment to a joint Western security agenda. Additionally, Georgia can benefit from the Biden administration's "democracy promotion" plan which can lead to greater cooperation in the democratization process (Biden 2020). Finally, given Biden's recent confrontational stance toward the Kremlin, Georgia can enhance its role as a reliable ally on Russia's border, leading to enhanced security and defense cooperation between the two states.

## Revitalizing Traditional Alliances

Trump's "America First" agenda shattered the country's traditional partnerships. Pressure on NATO members to increase defense expenditures which began under the Obama administration (McCaskill 2016; Biden 2020) and continued under Trump (Haltiwanger 2019), additionally, tense relations with the EU leading states have damaged the USA's international credibility. In 2017, soon after Trump's election, the German chancellor Angela Merkel stated that "Europe can no longer rely on the USA", assessing the disappointing G7 summit as "six against one" (DW 2017). Two years later, Emmanuel Macron warned European countries, that "they can no longer rely on America to defend NATO allies" (The Economist 2019). Trump withdrew from important global agreements, as the Iran Deal<sup>ii</sup> and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change<sup>iii</sup> (becoming the first country in the world exiting

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from it) (Hathaway 2020). Thus, Joe Biden will have to deal with the deep mistrust recently developed by Washington's European allies (Nye 2020).

Criticizing his predecessor for "belittling, undermining, and in some cases abandoning" the country's traditional partners, Biden sees a rehabilitation of the "united front of US allies" as the big plan for his presidency (Biden 2020). Re-enhancing USA leadership within NATO and restoring cooperation-based communication with the EU will be an important part of his foreign policy strategy. Biden has stated he will call a meeting of NATO leadership to, "make clear that we're back" (Roache 2020). Washington is likely to take a relatively constructive position with its European allies at the negotiation table since for Biden, "the United States' commitment is sacred, not transactional" (Biden 2020). This stance of the President-elect was confirmed when presenting his Secretary of State nominee Antony Blinken, calling him a "defender of global alliances" (Jakes et al. 2020). Biden's attitude will have an immediate, and beneficial effect on USA soft power, and it will enable the USA and the EU to return to pre-Trump levels of political and strategic cooperation (Nye 2020).

Since President-elect Biden's rhetoric includes a gradual rebuilding of the USA's traditional security responsibilities in the international arena, Georgia might find itself in a beneficial position. Tbilisi remains one of the West's most committed partners in the European neighborhood. If transatlantic tensions under Trump made Georgia's strategic role vulnerable (Kakachia et al.2020), Biden's alliance-fixing approach might return Georgia to the stable environment of the Western security agenda. A consensual transatlantic security strategy among the USA and the EU will shape a stronger, more trustworthy, and stable partnership environment for Tbilisi to ensure its commitment to the Western political and security agenda. Georgia can use this consensual atmosphere to attract stronger support when applying for EU membership in 2024 as is currently planned in Tbilisi (Botchorishvili 2020).

## **A Focus of Democracy Promotion**

Promoting democracy globally had been an important, and long standing strategy of US presidents through multiple administrations, and remains a priority for the incoming Biden's administration. As he has put it, "today democracy is under more pressure, than at any time since the 1930s" (Biden 2020). Hungary and Poland are ruled by populist right-wing leaders known for semi-authoritarian characteristics. Turkey, which is demonstrating drastic democratic backsliding is a concern for the President-elect as well. Biden has called Recep Tayyip Erdogan "autocrat" stating that, "[what the USA] should be doing is taking a very different approach to him now, making it clear that we support opposition leadership" (The New York Times 2020). Additionally, the geopolitical changes in the South Caucasus after the conflict in Nagorno-Karabagh has made Georgia's two neighboring states more vulnerable to non-democratic developments. The pro-reform team of Nikol Pashinyan has become extremely unpopular in Armenia due to the loss of territory during the Karabakh conflict (Aljazeera 2020; Lebanidze 2020). While Ilham Aliyev, whose Azerbaijan is among the "not free" countries (Freedom House 2020), has strengthened his positions after the success of Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabagh war. This leaves Georgia as the only actor in the region with the capabilities and desire to continue pursuing a stable process of democratization.

Biden's commitment to engage intensively with "democracies in trouble," in Europe, and beyond, may return Tbilisi to the enhanced focus of the USA. This approach, demonstrated by the President-elect throughout the recent years, can open up new opportunities for Georgia to position itself as a member of "the alliance of democracies" (Biden 2018). Tbilisi has the chance to put itself in the democracy-promotion campaign propagated by Biden (Biden 2020), who perceives Georgia, together with Ukraine and Moldova, as a "nation on the frontline of the freedom" (Biden 2018).

In this context, Tbilisi's task is to intensify its democratic improvements and show a commitment to develop its internal institutions. If Biden's plan of engagement with unstable democracies can meet Georgia's intensified attempts at democratization, the results will strengthen the Georgia-US strategic partnership. Additionally, enhanced value-based foreign relations with the USA could help Georgia's formal EU membership application in 2024 (Botchorishvili 2020).

### **How Biden Sees Russia?**

Informed by the memory of the failed reset with Russia, Biden has taken a confrontational tone towards Putin in recent years. As the Vice President, Biden witnessed the failure of the reset as a result of actions from Putin, such as the annexation of Crimea or intervening in the 2016 USA elections. He argues that Washington should continue to pursue a policy which includes deterrence (Biden 2016), naming Russia as the "biggest global threat" to the USA shortly before the recent elections (Reuters 2020). Additionally, the incoming president has not shown personal sympathy towards his Russian counterpart, a stark contrast to President Trump. During a visit to Moscow in 2011, then Vice President Biden referred to Putin as "soulless" and called Putin's government "paranoid" after the Alexi Navalny poisoning in 2020 (Mirovalev 2020). This rhetoric will shape the atmosphere between the two states after the inauguration of Biden as the 46<sup>th</sup> president of the USA.

Major long term geopolitical and national interests will be at stake during the Biden administration. Deepening Europe's energy dependency on Russia via Nord Stream 2 is a prime geopolitical concern for the USA. Describing the pipeline as a "bad deal for Europe" (Reuters 2016), Biden is constantly reconfirming he wants to tighten the sanctions against the project (Gugarats 2021). Cyber-threats coming from Russia are another factor which has gained importance in the run up to Biden's inauguration. In December, as the President-elect was preparing to enter the White House, a suspected "Russian state-sponsored" cyber-attack targeted the Treasury and Commerce Departments, and affected other federal institutions (Sanger 2020). Unlike President Trump, President-elect Biden has shown that he is going to confront the cyber-threats coming from Moscow and will "impose substantial costs on those responsible for such malicious attacks" (Vinograd 2020).

Side by side Ukraine, which is under the threat of losing its utility as an energy transit provider, Tbilisi can position itself as the stable ally in the sphere of energy transport corridors. At the same time, Georgia has, and still is, facing the cyber-challenges coming from Moscow. These threats are all opportunities to explore new spots of enhanced cooperation with Washington.

## Strategic Partnership and Expectations in Tbilisi

Across multiple administrations, Georgia has been searching for a role to play in the USA's defense and security agenda. In 2009 while visiting Tbilisi, then Vice President Biden said, "there is some concern, that our efforts to reset relations with Russia will come at the expense of Georgia. Let me be clear: they have not, they will not and they cannot" (Antidze & Robinson 2009). Soon after, "pressing the Reset button" he confirmed the USA's enthusiasm about NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine (Barry 2009), which is top security priority for both states. Until now neither Georgia nor Ukraine has seen a significant advancement towards this goal; however, intensified military cooperation between Georgia and the USA remains an important aspect of Georgia's security policy.

In November 2020, during Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's visit to Tbilisi, a group of Georgian experts and former security officials released a statement asking for a permanent US armed forces presence in the country (New Europe 2020). While mobilizing USA military troops to be permanently stationed in Georgia is not likely to take place in the near future, the more strategic reallocation of existing financial and human resources is under discussion (ზბოკვადი 2020).

Increased USA funding and military sales demonstrates Georgia's strategic, geopolitical importance (Kogan 2020). In 2016 the Obama administration signed the Memorandum of Deepening the Defense and Security Partnership, which upgraded the US's military assistance to Georgia for three years (Kogan 2020). Tbilisi should focus more on benefiting from the "reallocation" of existing resources than hoping for a notable increase of the USA military presence in Georgia. The gradual advancement of Georgian military capabilities, a continuation of military trainings taking place in Georgia, and accelerating reforms in the ministry of defense, should become the cornerstone of any enhanced strategic partnership between Tbilisi and Washington.

## Summing Up Georgia Under a Biden Presidency

Joe Biden, in comparison with his predecessor, is a predictable and experienced decision-maker. His intention to reactivate the United States' role as a stable ally opens up the possibility for smaller countries, such as Georgia, to gain momentum in Washington's renewed geopolitical plans. Biden seeks to return the USA to its position as a leading power within NATO and as a reliable partner to the EU. This should be welcomed in Tbilisi as Georgia continues to pursue its pro-Western foreign policy. Additionally, the incoming president's ambition to engage with emerging democracies, creates space for enhanced cooperation and gives Tbilisi a chance to find itself on a team of "fellow democracies". Finally, Biden's rhetoric towards Russia foreshadows a clash between the two countries. It will be possible to use this type of USA-Russia interaction to intensify cooperation between the USA and Georgia, and to expand military sales, improve logistical capacity, and to increase Georgia's security capability.

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<sup>i</sup> Joe Biden was projected to be the winner of the 2020 US Presidential Elections on November 7 by the Associated Press and key US news outlets. Donald Trump has refused to concede claiming fraud in some of the states.

<sup>ii</sup> JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) known as the Iran Deal, was signed in 2015 by the USA, Russia, China, France, UK, Germany and Iran. The Trump administration decided to exit the deal in 2018, all three European parties to the pact – Britain, France and Germany – have repeatedly stressed their commitment to saving it.

<sup>iii</sup> Paris Agreement on Climate Change or Paris Deal was drafted in 2015 and came into force in 2016. In 2019 Trump announced the withdrawal from the treaty. Member states must serve a 12-month notice period to the UN, as such the official withdrawal was registered on November 4, 2020.

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