



What Georgia should expect from the U.S. new administration?

Democracies all over the world have shared a wave of optimism emanating from Washington in the wake of Joe Biden's ascension to the White House. A less mercurial man than his predecessor and with vastly greater political experience, Biden is looked on with hope that his new administration will restore the role of the U.S. as an active promoter – and defender – of liberal democracy. This latter point has been an encouraging sign for former Soviet states that have since turned their aspirations westward, as has a [statement](#) that the President has already made: “the days of the United States rolling over in the face of Russia's aggressive actions... are over”.

Another reason for optimism comes from the fact that a number of the Biden administration's members are familiar with the risks posed by the Kremlin's foreign policy, as well as the issues facing areas such as the South Caucasus. Despite the fact that the Nagorno-Karabakh war has bolstered Russia's position in the region, the mood in Georgia is hopeful: it is believed that the new administration will give a new lease of life to the strategic partnership between Washington and Tbilisi, with further aid in advancing Georgia's defense capabilities, greater support for the country's democratic development, and firm advocacy over its future integration into NATO.

Regarding more immediate issues, it is expected from some quarters that the USA will help to prevent Georgia from further democratic backsliding, although this is not universal; skeptics in Georgia point to America's own problems – such as domestic political polarization, tense relations with China, and the continued damage done by COVID-19 – as a reason not to suppose that America will place Georgia and the South Caucasus highly on its list of priorities.

At the request of the **Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP)**, selected experts from the **U.S.** and **Georgia** have given their responses to the following two questions:

1. **Considering the unstable international conjuncture and the latest geopolitical upheavals in the South Caucasus, what should be expected from the Biden administration with regards to Georgia and the larger region?**
2. **To what extent is it anticipated that the new administration will further address Georgia's NATO membership and recommend the issue to other NATO members for consideration?**



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I think Georgia can expect the Biden Administration to take a more interested perspective towards the region, with the potential for more executive-level consideration of regional affairs and their long-term effects. That said, the Biden Administration appears to be focused primarily on domestic affairs, and principally the COVID-19 response and attendant socio-economic and political issues. Meanwhile, its foreign policy priorities look for the time being to be largely about strengthening global alliances and cooperation, managing an increasingly competitive relationship with China, and facilitating withdrawals from Afghanistan while monitoring violent extremism risks. Containing Russia is also likely to be high on the agenda, but also finding ways to avoid needless escalation.

In that array of priorities, Georgia is not especially prominent on its own, except perhaps as adjunct to Washington's thinking about Russia. This is a role that Georgian policymakers have been content to play for the better part of the last quarter century now, but it also pigeonholes Georgia to play the enduring part of Russian

victim, which in some ways will elicit sympathy and support from the West, but also retards Georgia's goal to be seen as an independent actor with the capability to be a net contributor to its and regional security. All that said, it is also true that President Biden and many of his top advisors have demonstrated a particular interest in Georgia in the past, and this may lead to certain opportunities for Georgia, but that should not necessarily be seen as a *deus ex machina* to solve Georgian political or security dilemmas. I should also point out that it is far from a consensus in Washington that Russia was a "winner" following the 2020 Karabakh war. That is an interpretation shared by some segments of the U.S. analytical community, but certainly not all; it is not my conclusion, and I would hazard to guess that it may even be a minority view.

I think there is an unfortunate assumption in many Georgian policy circles that NATO membership is a matter of effective U.S. lobbying on its behalf. It is not. Although U.S. advocacy can make a difference in this regard, particularly for edge cases, opposition to Alliance expansion -- and, let's be clear, particularly to candidates eastward -- are powerful and categorical among some of the most influential member states. I believe that this is a misreading of NATO's intended purpose; after all, the U.S. did not create NATO and accept European states because they were strong, but because they were weak in the face of Soviet aggression.

However, correctly or not, that is not the dominant interpretation among many European member states. There are ways the U.S. can assist Georgia in its broader goal of deepening Euro-Atlantic integration and improving its national security, but that depends on a certain quality of Georgian receptiveness. The U.S. can also provide assistance in improving Georgian readiness for NATO through continued political, institutional, and security reforms, and even speak out in favor of Georgian membership, but I do not expect -- and I doubt the Biden Administration expects -- a breakthrough in this regard.



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I think under the Biden administration, Georgia and the South Caucasus will remain on the periphery of American foreign policy interests, as was the case for the last 15 years. While the South Caucasus never was a top priority, the region was a key element of the Caspian energy policy, as well as the post-Cold War wider European security strategy of the US in the late '90s and early 2000s.

America currently has no clear strategy for Europe or the Middle East (unless we call dis-engagement a strategy) that could integrate the South Caucasus. There are signs that the Biden administration will have some focus on Ukraine,

but there is no clarity of strategy there as well. The magnitude of the problems in the South Caucasus, and the new configuration of forces formed after the war in Karabakh are not welcoming for the positive US engagement. At the same time, there is not much appetite in Washington to jump into a diplomatic process of damage control to repair and restore the failed Minsk Group efforts on Nagorno Karabakh.

In terms of the deepening bilateral ties between Georgia and the US, this process will continue, but I do not expect a major breakthrough in this regard under the current administration, unless some major geopolitical events trigger significant reconsideration. I think Georgia needs to offer more creative ways of greater American engagement, which will demonstrate the value of Georgia to a broader range of American interests.

I think the issue of the future NATO membership for Georgia will depend on the overall European strategy of the US and on the depth of the US-European partnership. At this moment, there are no signs that Georgia's NATO membership will be elevated to the top of priorities of the US's European policy. I do not expect that the US will invest serious political capital in dealing with its European partners under the current circumstances.

My lack of optimism is enhanced by expected political transition in Germany, which was already skeptical under Angela Merkel since the 2008 Bucharest Summit. Under all the political scenarios of the German power transition, we will end up with even greater opponents to the enlargement of NATO. Despite this, Georgia needs to continue its close partnership with NATO as a tool for the strengthening of institutional and defense capabilities.



Prof. Neil MacFarlane, *St Anne's College, University of Oxford*

With regard to Georgia, those following the flow are very concerned about the trajectory of Georgian politics currently. Both the UNM and the GD have demonstrated that they do not care much about American perspectives on their domestic policies. The two parties are locked into a death grip. Outsiders do not have much leverage.

Concerning the second point, the Nagorno Karabakh situation is intractable. Russia and Turkey have enhanced their influence in the region as a whole. The influence of the United States, NATO, the EU, and the OSCE has declined. None of the Western actors show any sign of dramatic new initiatives to rebalance the region.

Despite the reviving rhetorical emphasis on democracy promotion, the US administration is focused on their domestic issues (COVID, unemployment, economic revival and debt). Internationally, they have China, Russia-NATO, and sorting out what to do about the struggling international economy, leaving aside climate change. There is not much room in that agenda for Georgia or the Southern Caucasus.

The Georgia-NATO answer follows from the logic above. There are serious risks for the US in pressuring for Georgian membership, not least Russian opposition and Russian military superiority at the regional level. Georgian membership is not a key US policy issue, and is crowded out by the others. Even if they supported Georgian membership, they would likely be

unsuccessful in pushing others to accept the idea. Remember 2008: the US has much less influence in NATO now than it did then.



Prof. Daniel S. Hamilton, *Austrian Marshall Plan Foundation Professor and formerly Executive Director of the Center for Transatlantic Relations*

Georgia has gone to great lengths to show that is able to assume the responsibilities of NATO membership. Nevertheless, there is no consensus within NATO to admit Georgia to membership. The most important issue holding back Georgia's candidacy, however, is internal, not external: the growing prospect that Georgia could be sliding back from the democratic progress it has made as a country. There are questions about the integrity of democratic procedures and institutions. There are concerns about corruption and waning enthusiasm for reforms among the country's political elites. Russia is exploiting these fissures for its own purposes, but Russia is not solely responsible for the fact that those fissures exist.

In addition, the pandemic and associated economic challenges have turned many NATO countries inward. Pressures on defense budgets abound. Considerable challenges have arisen within NATO regarding the strength and resilience of democracy that make it hard to discuss bringing in new members who also face considerable democratic challenges.

For all of these reasons, there is no near-term prospect of Georgian membership in NATO. Nonetheless, the Biden Administration has begun

the hard work of reviving NATO and reassuring allies and partners about U.S. commitment to the Alliance. The U.S. will push for a new NATO Strategic Concept that positions NATO partnerships for future, rather than past,

challenges. Georgia has an opportunity to shape its partnership with NATO, and to do the hard work of reform that will enable it to create conditions that can allow it to join the European mainstream.



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