



Georgia After the Mission in Afghanistan: How to Reclaim Relevance in NATO's Current Agenda

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The decision of the USA and NATO to end an almost 20 year-long mission in Afghanistan poses additional challenges to Georgia's path of Euro-Atlantic integration. Ending the mission, and withdrawing US and NATO forces will reduce Tbilisi's direct military engagement with NATO. At the same time, the results of NATO summits held in June 2021 do not suggest there is much hope for deepening Georgia's ties with NATO or furthering Georgia's path towards Euro-Atlantic integration (NATO 2021a). This poses a question: at this stage of NATO-Georgia relations what kind of space and opportunities exist for Tbilisi to reclaim relevance in the Brussels agenda?

Alongside additional challenges, there is a pressing need to search for new paths forward: in terms of military enhancement and strengthening the political component of integration. In order to discuss this issue, this text first of all reviews what changed in the global security strategy of Washington and Brussels after the mission in Afghanistan came to the end. Next, areas where Tbilisi can look for new ways to cooperate with NATO are analyzed. And finally, the results of the Brussels summit and their political implications for Georgia's integration in NATO are discussed.

Georgia in NATO's Focus After the End of the Mission in Afghanistan

The year 2021 turned out to be important for the transatlantic world. A number of changes took place, with developments leaving NATO-Georgian relations in a uniquely new situation. Joe Biden's election as president of the United States created the expectation that the agreement within NATO regarding shared contributions made for global security would be strengthened and resorted after it's weakening in recent years. The military mission in

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Afghanistan ended: the USA and its allies have to leave the country by September 11, 2021 (bbc.com. 2021a), which, considering the scale of the mission in Afghanistan, will cause certain changes in the way Washington and Brussels view global security. Also, NATO's strategy for the upcoming decade was planned at the Brussels NATO summit (NATO 2021b). Each one of these events have had a special impact on forming new circumstances of NATO-Georgian relations.

NATO's mission in Afghanistan was the longest-term and the most important military operation of the alliance. The withdrawal of US and alliance forces started on May 1st and, symbolically, they plan to be fully removed by September 11.ⁱ Participating in the Afghanistan mission is one of the crucial ways Georgia builds up and deepens strategic NATO-Georgian relations (Liklikadze 2021). The successful participation in ISAF and RMSⁱⁱ is considered a successful example of military cooperation with NATO and a step closer to NATO standards. Georgia's engagement in the mission of Afghanistan as a non-NATO member country is politically and morally valuable to Tbilisi in its quest for NATO membership: Georgia is one of the biggest contributors in the mission of Afghanistan among non-member states and even out-contributes some member countries as well (Muchaidze 2021) (Table 1).

Georgia will withdraw from Afghanistan along with the allied forces. Therefore, all the benefits from the military as well as a political standpoint, received by Tbilisi as a result of its participation in the mission, will be significantly decrease. This is a new challenge for the Georgian government on the NATO-Georgia integration path.

NATO		Resolute Support Mission		Troop Contributing Nations	
	Albania	99		Germany	1,300
	Armenia	121		Greece	11
	Australia	80		Hungary	8
	Austria	16		Italy	895
	Azerbaijan	120		Latvia	2
	Belgium	72		Lithuania	40
	Bosnia-Herzegovina	66		Luxembourg	2
	Bulgaria	117		Mongolia	233
	Czech Republic	52		Netherlands	160
	Denmark	135		New Zealand	6
	Estonia	45		North Macedonia	17
	Finland	20		Norway	101
	Georgia	860		Poland	290
				Portugal	174
				Romania	619
				Slovakia	25
				Slovenia	6
				Spain	24
				Sweden	16
				Turkey	600
				Ukraine	10
				United Kingdom	750
				United States	2,500
			Total		9,592

table 1: Resolute Support Mission – Troop Contributing Countries. February 2021. Source: <https://bit.ly/3vOancY>

- *The USA and NATO after the Afghanistan Mission – from new objectives to new challenges*

In terms of global interest, there are different viewpoints regarding US and NATO objectives and what the decision to fully withdraw from Afghanistan tells us about the future plans of Washington and Brussels on global security. According to some viewpoints, the decision to end the mission in Afghanistan was caused by the fatigue this operation caused the American political elite (Dzebisashvili 2021). Although according to NATO's official statement, the mission's end doesn't mean that relations between the allies and Afghanistan are over, it only means that a new stage of these relations has just begun (NATO 2021c). We can consider the Enduring Partnership Initiative as a supporting argument, which has existed since 2010 and implies political cooperation between NATO and Afghanistan. Supposedly, the USA and NATO will continue working with Afghanistan under this very direction.

On the other hand, reviewers assume that the withdrawal from Afghanistan indicates that the focus of the USA security concept is shifting from the middle east towards the threats coming from China and Russia (Ryan & DeYoung 2021). This decision was followed by quite contradictory responses in American civil society as well as within circles of experts (bbc.com 2021b). Washington believes withdrawing from Afghanistan is the right decision because the threat of extremist governments becoming stronger no longer exists (Nossiter 2021). Therefore, in regards to global security, Washington has a chance to focus on strategically more important challenges.

If this assumption comes true, and within the international security policy the USA will direct its resources towards such strategic issues as the threats coming from Russia, it will be a strategically important change for Tbilisi. But the possible refocus of America's vision on Russia won't change much for Georgia at this stage, considering the fact that Georgia was not even discussed during the meeting between Biden and Putin.

According to some, Afghanistan was the point of division between the USA and the European members of NATO: the lack of intensive engagement by the rest of the members of the alliance in the mission was causing the disappointment in Washington, while the unanimously agreed upon withdrawal from Afghanistan will terminate another possible source of tension in Euro-Atlantic relations (Felbab-Brown 2021). In some sense, if Trans-Atlantic relations are improved, then indirectly the context for Georgia's relations with Brussels and Washington will be as well (Samkharadze 2021).

Ultimately, ending the Afghanistan mission creates a considerable vacuum for Tbilisi in terms of its military cooperation with NATO. Therefore, along with observing the global context, it's necessary to seek new visions in order not to lose relevance in Brussels' agenda.

▪ *Is Georgia in search of a new function?*

By participating in the Afghanistan mission, Georgia obtained an important moral advantage to politically promote the issue of membership in NATO's agenda (Dzebisashvili 2021). This was an excellent opportunity for Tbilisi to demonstrate practical, military compatibility and positioned itself not only as the "support seeker but also as the support giver" (Muchaidze 2021). After the end of the mission, the possibilities for Georgia to contribute militarily and use these contributions as an advantage on the path towards membership decreased. Considering this background, Philip Reeker's (the acting assistant secretary of state) visit to Georgia was particularly interesting. Georgia's Minister of Defense Juansher Burchiladze stated publicly after meeting with Reeker that a new stage has begun in terms of both Black Sea security and military-political cooperation (Euronews Georgia 2021). The fact that as a result of the Afghanistan mission Georgia became a valuable non-member partner for the alliance was proven by the not only the chairman of the Tbilisi-NATO committee Feld-Marshal Stuart Peach's visit to the 30-year anniversary of Georgia's national defense forces but also the high-level meetings he held in Georgia as well (Civil.ge 2021b).

Georgia can use this image and means of communication for seeking new functions in the context of cooperation with NATO. Despite the fact that the issue of deeper political integration in NATO is constantly questioned, and NATO's open-door policy doesn't determine the paths to the membership at this stage, Georgia has sufficiently developed logistical cooperation in regards to training infrastructure and conducting trainings (Kakachia, Lebanidze & Dzebisashvili 2020).

After the end of the Afghanistan mission, the functioning and the progress of the NATO-Georgian Joint Training and Assessment center and the Sachkhere Mountain-training school remains as Georgia's only tool in terms of ensuring its compatibility with NATO. These are training locations and training activities, which, as usual, receive a high evaluation and praise from international partners. Since according to the official statement, training for the Afghanistan operation still remains on the agenda, Georgia can try to assume a new role or function in this area (Muchaidze 2021; Hamilton & Coffey 2021).

On one hand, Tbilisi should encourage implementing a maximum workload on the abovementioned training and exercise locations, and take advantage of any opportunity to assume an infrastructural function. On the other hand, it's crucial to start working on initiating practical dialogue about the enlargement of NATO's infrastructure and the placement of the official logistics of the alliance in Georgia (Dzebisashvili 2021), which will significantly increase the quality of military-technical cooperation. In this regard, for Georgia noteworthy precedents might be the NATO Centers of Excellence (COEs) which are international military organizations that train and educate leaders and specialists from NATO member and partner countries (NATO 2021d). The Centre of Excellence for

Countering Hybrid Threats was inaugurated in Finland (Hybridcoe.fi 2021), which is a non-member state but despite of this introducing the immediate NATO infrastructure on its territory was strategically necessary and, relatively, doable for the Alliance (NATO 2017). Tbilisi can orient on such precedents and keep working based on similar experiences in order to ensure hosting NATO in terms of logistics on its territory.

The ambition of Turkey “to further deepen its footprint” in Afghanistan through training Afghan soldiers as well as protecting the Kabul airport after the withdrawal of the USA is especially important in this process (Kugelman 2021). If Turkey will make an agreement with the USA, Taliban and Brussels about these terms, considering its experience of strategic cooperation with Turkey, Tbilisi might have the opportunity to continue actively contributing in the context of Afghanistan (Muchaidze 2021; Dzebisashvili 2021). Also, despite the fact that the Afghanistan mission was the longest-term and the biggest operation of NATO, which granted the non-member states the biggest opportunity to intensively engage, Georgia can begin determining other possible functions in smaller NATO operations, such as the missions in Kosovo, Iraq or Africa (NATO 2021e; Hamilton & Coffey 2021). This is relevant especially considering that Georgia already has engagement experience in the international operations of these regions.

Without any question, the end of the Afghanistan mission reduces certain spaces for Georgian-NATO relations, such as the permanent and direct confirmation of military, as well as political aspirations to the alliance. Although, after the Afghanistan mission, Tbilisi can start looking for a new niche based on its already formed positive image or military-infrastructure resources. This should happen as fast as possible because the end of the Afghanistan mission is not the only challenge on the path of Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration.

Brussels Summit: Georgia Beyond the Radar?

Georgia’s integration in NATO becoming an active political conversation is still seeming like a distant possibility. Given this reality, in recent years, Georgian expert circles have been discussing whether or not we should perceive NATO-Georgian relations as “the overlap of interests or hiding differences” (Kakachia, Lebanidze & Dzebisashvili 2020). Within the context of opportunities for military-strategic cooperation with NATO decreasing, the NATO 2021 Brussels summit and its outcomes should be especially important for Georgia.

Although, in contradiction to the importance of the summit, neither Georgia nor Ukraine were invited despite the fact that both are actively aspiring for a Membership Action Plan (MAP). This is unlike previous summits. The record about Georgia in the Brussels summit communique doesn’t leave much room for hope in terms of Tbilisi’s advancement towards MAP in the near future (NATO 2021a). This is followed by the fact that Joe Biden’s first

meeting (as US president) with president of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin ended without raising the issue of Georgia in the discussion (Kunchulia 2021a), meanwhile, in Georgia there still is the expectation that the Biden administration will adopt policies that will undermine Russian influence (Samkharadze 2021). Therefore, from a political standpoint, it's vital for Georgia to have an updated strategy plan, which will help Tbilisi maintain the topical relevance that it had before in the agenda of the alliance.

- *The importance of NATO integration's political components is increasing*

As the special representative of NATO in the Caucasus James Appathurai stated, due to strengthened political consultations, there is a bigger chance for Georgia to be under NATO's more focused attention (Euronews Georgia 2021). Numerous messages communicated by NATO indicate that Georgia's development in terms of democracy, is a crucial component for increasing an optimistic attitude towards Georgia's integration into NATO (civil.ge 2021a; civil.ge. 2021c). Considering this, if before Georgia had a certain moral advantage due to its engagement in the Afghanistan mission to balance the fallbacks in democracy, soon this advantage will cease to exist (Dzebisashvili, 2021). This implies that the Georgian government has to be more active in terms of providing the state's compatibility with NATO not only from the military standpoint, but also in terms of democratic development as well.

By any metric, democratic development in Georgia is nothing to be proud of. Aside from the fact that authoritative international indexes permanently point to the reversal of democracy throughout recent years (Economist 2020; Freedom House 2021), the qualitative deterioration of democratization is discussed within the expert circles as well (Kakachia & Lebanidze 2019). Therefore, at this stage the major obstacle for Georgia in terms of its relations with NATO is the weakness of democratic processes and unless Tbilisi shows advancement in this component, it would be hard to talk about specific dates of Georgia's advanced integration (civil.ge 2021a).

Ukraine and Georgia's lack of invitation to the Brussels summit is justified by logistical challenges and the overloaded schedule of the president of the USA - not by the possibility of negative relations with Tbilisi or Kyiv (Euronews Georgia 2021). Although, it's a fact that this year for the first time Georgia didn't get the opportunity to state its interests and challenges within the agenda, therefore, any positive developments that would be categorically different from the previous summit were less likely.

Additionally, it seems like the Georgian government is trying to adjust reality in the eyes of the society: regarding the question of why was the issue of Georgia not raised during the conversation between Biden and Putin, according to the statement of the ministry of foreign affairs, "Georgia was implied in the speech made by the president of the USA during the press conference" (Kunchulia 2021a). Thus, it's clear for those who follow Georgian politics

that from the political and diplomatic standpoint, not mentioning Georgia next to Ukraine is a serious sign of alarm and suggests that it's possible Georgia will appear more rarely on the radar of Brussels (Kunchulia 2021b). With this very background, Biden invited Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky to the White House (amerikishma 2021), by doing so, it seems likely that he confirmed the importance of Ukraine in the US's political strategy towards the Black Sea region.

While it's true that neither Ukraine nor Georgia were invited to the Brussels summit, Kyiv manages to maintain relevance to the agendas of Brussels and Washington, due to a number of independent factors. This is the reason why Georgia needs a permanent and intensified strategic cooperation with Ukraine, bilaterally as well as in terms of building up multilateral cooperation in the field of security of the Black Sea region, in order for the issue of Georgia to not be demoted in the regional security agenda (Muchaidze 2021).

Ultimately, NATO-Georgia relations are not unilateral: NATO also has a certain obligation to do a kind of "homework" in terms of encouraging military reforms and democratization in Georgia (Dzebisashvili 2020), but now is the especially important period, when Georgia needs to put in even more political effort so that the final objective of becoming a member of NATO doesn't turn into even more distant perspective than it used to be. This effort should be developed in two main directions – intensive inner democratization and finding a more distinct regional context through deepening intensive partnerships in the Black Sea region and beyond, whether it's engagement in new international missions or determining a new and functional niche, such as training and preparation.

Results and Possibilities for Georgia

To conclude it can be said that now it's even more important for the government to increase its effort in terms of relations with NATO. On one hand, it's important to look for a new function in the global agenda of NATO specifically for Tbilisi: based on the available resources, Georgia can fill in and strengthen a certain niche in the direction of military training and increasing compatibility with NATO. Also, to work actively on strengthening the infrastructural representation of NATO on Georgian territory.

On the second hand, the political dimension of NATO membership is relatively noteworthy. Besides providing military compatibility with Brussels, democratization is equally crucial. This aspect becomes especially important with the degradation of Georgian democracy. Aside from inner-democratic advancement, the country will necessarily require a strong affiliation towards partners that have challenges and objectives similar to Georgia. The most distinct among such partners is Ukraine, cooperation with this country in one context will make the final objectives of both countries relatively more realistic and achievable on the path of the deep integration in NATO.

ⁱ Mission in Afghanistan started as the result of 9/11 terrorist attack: after the terrorist attack against the USA NATO initiated article 5, which is the milestone of a collective defence and implies that the attack on one of the NATO members is considered as the attack on every member of NATO.

ⁱⁱ The International Security Assistance Force – ISAF was the military mission of the USA and alliance in Afghanistan 2001-2014; Georgia was engaged in ISAF since August 2004. From January 1st 2015 ISAF was replaced by the Resolute Support Mission – RSM where Georgia is engaged from day one.

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