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# Georgia's New Geopolitical Patron

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## The United States and Georgia Sign a Strategic Partnership Agreement

Contrary to the Americans' desire, Georgia recently failed to secure a Membership Action Plan in NATO. But this doesn't mean that the United States has abandoned its policy of spreading democracy in the Southern Caucasus region. On the contrary, some historic examples demonstrate that the country is willing and ready to form cooperative relationships with non-NATO member states whenever its interests so demand.

For the Southern Caucasus region, the new (political and calendar) year started with the signing of the Charter on Strategic Partnership between the United States and Georgia. The six-page-long document was signed by the Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on behalf of the United States, and by the Foreign Affairs Minister Grigol Vashadze on the part of Georgia.

In the grand scheme of things, the appearance of such a document was not a sensation. It is no secret that by now, Washington has been patronizing Tbilisi for a few years. Georgia (just like other countries of the Southern Caucasus) is a part of America's ambitious geopolitical project titled "The Greater Middle East." A special role in it has been assigned to Georgia, for a number of reasons.

Firstly, it is due to geographic and strategic factors. Georgia is the only country in the Caucasus that borders all other states in the region (Armenia, for example, has no joint borders with Russia, and its borders with Azerbaijan are closed because of the Karabakh conflict). Georgia's relationships with Azerbaijan and Armenia are equally positive, which means that Georgia is the state that could theoretically become the "connecting link" for Transcaucasia. This is the country that the "political pipes" pass through (the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines); and soon the strategically important railroad, Baku-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi-Kars, will pass through it as well.

Secondly, there is the ideological factor. Compared to the failure of the projects of democratization in Iraq and Afghanistan, Georgia could be seen as an example of the American political and economic standards being implemented successfully, especially since the 2003 "revolution of roses" is still seen in the United States as a "breakthrough toward freedom and the market." Naturally, in this case we are not talking about the reality, but about the image sold to the mass media and to the electorate.

This is exactly why the United States has been a consistent lobbyist of Georgia's North Atlantic aspirations. Let's recall that as early as in November of 2006, a law draft titled "The NATO Freedom Consolidation Act of 2007" was approved in the upper house of Congress - the Senate. In March of 2007 it was supported by the members of the lower house of Congress by a simple majority of votes. In April of 2007 it was signed by the U.S. President George Bush. This law draft recommended providing support (including financial support) for Georgia's and Ukraine's desire to speed up the process of their admission into NATO. On February 13, 2008, the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations unanimously passed a resolution supporting a speedy entrance for Georgia and Ukraine into a Membership Action Plan at NATO. This is the position that Washington also actively promoted at the Bucharest Summit in April of last year, despite the fact that this initiative did not arouse great enthusiasm, to say the least,

among the United States' allies in "old Europe" (Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Belgium). Virtually on the eve of the "five-day war," in July of 2008, during her official visit to Tbilisi, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared that her country will "fight for its friends."

The situation changed in August of 2008. The tragic events in South Ossetia forced Washington to make some adjustments to its plans and views. Firstly, Mikheil Saakashvili's "Tskhinvali Blitzkrieg" came as a surprise to the United States. Of course, Washington was interested in redefining the status quo both in Abkhazia and in South Ossetia. Moreover, American diplomacy took a lot of action in this direction (in particular by supporting the Georgian authorities on the international level, turning a blind eye even to such obvious "violations of democracy" as the events in Tbilisi on November 7, 2007). Washington was interested in exerting political pressure on Russia's positions in Transcaucasia. At the same time, however, the United States was far from enthused by the military methods of resolving conflicts, realizing the inevitable involvement of Russia in a military confrontation with all the possible consequences. And in August of 2008 these consequences were quick to appear.

Russia's 58th Army participated in providing military support for the de facto state of South Ossetia. Then Russia formally - legally - recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, thus demonstrating its readiness to play the role of a state that is the revisionist in the post-Soviet area, as well as clearly declaring the Caucasus as a zone of its vital, essential interests. Washington understood quite well that if this doesn't mean a strategic victory for Moscow (in a situation of a global crisis, many of the Kremlin's moves and decisions during the "hot August" are ambivalent at least), it seriously complicates both Georgia and Ukraine's advancement into the North Atlantic Alliance. An open military confrontation with Russia (with all of Russia's miscalculations and mistakes in the planning and realization of the operation in South Ossetia) is not among the West's priorities. Thus, serious changes have been made in the Georgian (or, in a wider sense, in the Caucasian) direction of American foreign policy.

Washington continued to patronize Georgia within the scope of the Geneva talks, which were essentially meant to determine the new status quo following the "five-day war." On the eve of the NATO foreign ministers' meeting in Brussels in December, the United States acknowledged the fact that Georgia cannot yet become a part of the alliance, and moved on to implement the practice of developing a bilateral ally relationship outside of the North Atlantic structures—a practice that it is well acquainted with.

The United States has a lot of experience in interacting with particular countries without NATO's "cover" when necessary. The fact that Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Israel, Japan, Egypt or Spain (before it was accepted in 1982) were not NATO members never stopped and does not stop the United States from having effective military and political partnerships with the countries and regions of the world that can be placed in the realm of U.S. national interests. Perhaps the brightest example of such a partnership is the American-Spanish relationship from 1953 to 1982. After World War II, the regime of Francisco Franco had an ambiguous reputation, and members of the Alliance could not come to a consensus in regard to accepting his country into NATO, even in view of a "threat from the East."

Nevertheless, in 1953 Washington and Madrid signed the Pact of Madrid on military partnership, which allowed Spain to avoid many sharp corners connected to the reputation of its leader. Until May 30, 1982 (the official

date of Spain's entry into NATO) this country was able to successfully develop relations with the Alliance's strongest member outside of NATO's bureaucratic structures.

In January of 2009 Georgia started on the Spanish path. It formally secured something that had already become reality--the geopolitical patronage on the part of the United States. Without having any chances of being accepted into NATO (but at the same time having a rather specific reputation), Tbilisi will work on developing its strategic relationship with Washington. This is exactly why the Georgian State Minister for Reintegration, Temuri Iakobashvili, has already compared the January 9 Washington Charter with the Georgievsk Treaty signed on July 24 (August 4) of 1783 between Russia and the most powerful Georgian kingdom of that time, Kartli-Kakheti. The comparison pointed to the fact that his country once again has a geopolitical patron. This role used to be played by Russia, and now it has been taken over by the United States. Although, the Georgievsk Treaty has also been mentioned in a different context. In the New Year's Eve address to his nation, Georgia's president Mikheil Saakashvili declared that the document on Georgian-American strategic partnership will actually become "an exit from the Georgievsk Treaty" and "a farewell to the era of the big and the little brother."

At the same time, if we compare the Treaty of the 18th century with the Charter of the 21st, we can't help but note a fundamental difference. The former document, which is now being demonstratively renounced by modern Georgia, was legally binding (although it had been violated both by the Russian Empire and by the Tsar of Kartli-Kakheti). If we talk about the Washington charter, even a quick glance at its text is enough to realize that what we have is a set of propaganda clichés from the dictionary of the "builder of international democracy," without any specific legal or political obligations. The preamble of the Charter says: "Emphasize that this cooperation between our two democracies is based on shared values and common interests. These include expanding democracy and economic freedom, protecting security and territorial integrity, strengthening the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the right of dignified, secure and voluntary return of all internally displaced persons and refugees, supporting innovation and technological advances, and bolstering Eurasian energy security."

Here is a loaded question - who and how will ensure the realization of the rights of "all internally displaced persons and refugees?" Are the U.S. marines willing and ready to take on the obligation, in addition to their Afghanistan and Iraq duties, to carry out this compulsory yet seemingly voluntary return of the Georgian population to the whole territory of Abkhazia (not only the Gal district) and to the four villages of the Liakhv corridor of South Ossetia?

The items listed in Section 1 of the Charter, titled Principles of Partnership, also can't but evoke a smile. The first item of the section states: "Support for each other's sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and inviolability of borders constitutes the foundation of our bilateral relations." Now, this is truly a revelation! Does the United States really have problems with inviolability of borders or territorial integrity? Does anyone, except for the obvious, open marginals and the professional "enemies of America," really doubt the state affiliations of Alaska, Texas or the Hawaiian Islands?

The third item of this section also creates associations with the blessed memories of the "stagnation period." "Cooperation between democracies on defense and security is essential to respond effectively to threats to peace and security." It resembles the partnership between the states of the

"world socialist system." Didn't - and doesn't - the United States have experience of forming military and political partnerships with non-democratic states (from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan) if its national interests so require?!

The new document about the Georgian-American strategic partnership will probably strengthen the opinions of those who see Saakashvili as "a puppet of the United States." However, in reality, practically all members of the Georgian expert and political community would have to be considered as puppets, and this would be a significant simplification. Georgia's American choice today is a reaction to Russia's position; and Russia, for reasons that have been described many times (and primarily due to the issues of security in the North Caucasus), is not really prepared to participate in "bringing the Caucasian state together." It's nothing personal, as they say; it's only a process of forming of a "nation state." But will the transatlantic power really help in this process? This is a rhetorical question that neither the Charter signed on January 9, 2009, nor any following memorandums and communiqués can answer. Meanwhile, as long as the United States still has to deal with such unsolved problems as Iraq and especially Afghanistan, there is a chance that pragmatism will prevail over the ideology and practice of "international democracy."

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