

NATO-Georgia Relations Through the Summit Declarations

The Georgian Dream government has displayed a cautious approach toward NATO membership, prioritizing the stabilization of relations with Russia since it came to power in 2012. This strategic shift has slowed down NATO-Georgia relations despite strong public support for NATO membership. Georgia has historically played an active role in NATO-led operations, showcasing its commitment through troop contributions. However, recent years have seen a decline in Georgia's participation not only in NATO missions, particularly after the end of Western involvement in Afghanistan, but also in multinational exercises.

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The continued postponement of granting Georgia the Membership Action Plan (MAP) has jeopardized the future of NATO-Georgia relations. Russian propaganda has constantly capitalized on the absence of a clear path to membership, facilitating frustration in Georgian political discourse and public sentiments. NATO's insistence on democratic reforms as prerequisites for membership added another layer of complexity, especially since the Georgian Dream openly turned to authoritarian practices and started to echo Russian anti-NATO narratives directly.

NATO-Georgia relations have dramatically evolved since the 2008 Bucharest summit, which marked the first official commitment to Georgia's NATO membership. The journey from the political statement that Georgia "will become a member" to concrete integration-related steps has faced several challenges, mainly due to Russian aggression and turbulences in Georgia's domestic politics. Still, the unprecedented promise of membership granted in



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NATO SUMMIT'S
VISUAL ACUITY TEST



NATO EYE TEST

2008	GEORGIA	$\frac{100 \text{ FT.}}{30.5 \text{ M}}$	1
2014	GEORGIA	$\frac{70 \text{ FT.}}{21.3 \text{ M}}$	2
2016	GEORGIA	$\frac{50 \text{ FT.}}{15.2 \text{ M}}$	3
2023	GEORGIA	$\frac{40 \text{ FT.}}{12.2 \text{ M}}$	4
2024	G E O R G I A	$\frac{30 \text{ FT.}}{9.14 \text{ M}}$	5
2026		$\frac{25 \text{ FT.}}{7.62 \text{ M}}$	6

Bucharest has been reiterated at all subsequent NATO summits until the 2024 Washington summit. The Washington summit declaration, which mentioned Georgia in only one sentence, without any reference to the Bucharest summit decisions, marks a new era in NATO-Georgia relations.

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Georgia-NATO relations have three vitally essential aspects: practical cooperation, political integration, and support for territorial integrity. As [detailed](#) earlier this year in this journal, practical cooperation focuses on military capacity-building and is critical in achieving acceptable levels of defensibility. The integration process involves strategic decisions facilitating Georgia's accession, eventually leading to NATO's security guarantee. Strengthening Georgia's defensibility and attaining security guarantees from NATO is directly linked to and could be the only feasible way to restore Georgia's territorial integrity peacefully.

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Summit declarations can be useful instruments for evaluating progress in essential dimensions of NATO's work. Sadly, unlike any other summit declaration since 2008, the 2024 Washington summit does not report any progress in any of the three vital dimensions of NATO-Georgia relations, signifying the startling halt of the partnership.

Declarations from various NATO summits have consistently indicated positive dynamics in at

least one of the key dimensions of NATO-Georgia relations. The Washington summit is a stark exception; Georgia, previously one of NATO's closest partners, was mentioned only once in the summit declaration. This mention, however, was neither in the context of cooperation, integration, or support for its territorial integrity. It was merely a reminder to Russia of its international commitment to withdraw forces from countries where it maintains a military presence without consent.

Dynamics of NATO-Georgia Relations through the Summit Declarations

Previous summits, shaped by the specific contexts in which they were held, have reflected the evolving status quo in NATO-Georgia relations. In this article, we examine the Bucharest, Warsaw, and Vilnius summits and compare the status of Georgia-NATO relations as viewed through the prism of the summit declarations.

The Bucharest summit (2008), guided by the difficulties of digesting the new Eastern NATO members and enlargement fatigue, struggled with forging political consensus for advancing Georgia's NATO membership. However, NATO registered a clear commitment to Georgia's eventual integration into the Alliance and strongly emphasized support for its territorial integrity.

The Warsaw Summit (2016) occurred amid heightened security concerns following Russia's annexation of Crimea. The summit focused on increasing the defensibility of NATO's Eastern Flank and, in this context, on strengthening Georgia's defense capabilities. It emphasized practical cooperation and reaffirmed NATO's commitment to Georgia's membership and territorial integrity.

The Vilnius summit (2023), contextually dominated by the topic of Russia's full-scale war against

Ukraine, still maintained a secondary focus on Georgia. The summit reaffirmed support for Georgia's territorial integrity and recognized progress in practical cooperation, but the primary attention was on the regional security dynamics related to Ukraine.

The Washington summit (2024) took place against the background of the Georgian government's authoritarian drift. Unlike the previous declarations, the Allies were deafeningly silent on Georgia. The 2024 Declaration indicated a pause in NATO-Georgia relations and a lack of new initiatives or commitments. This suggests a halt in Georgia's active pursuit of membership and an apparent decline in support within NATO.

Bucharest Summit

The 2008 Bucharest summit marked a pivotal moment for Georgia's NATO aspirations. NATO clearly articulated its support for Georgia's membership, asserting that Georgia will become a member of the Alliance. This summit focused on fostering political consensus and advancing Georgia's integration into NATO. It highlighted the importance of democratic reforms in Georgia, underscored Georgia's significant contributions to NATO operations, and initiated a period of intensive political engagement to address outstanding issues related to Georgia's Membership Action Plan. NATO also reaffirmed its commitment to Georgia's territorial integrity, emphasizing support for its sovereignty within internationally recognized borders. More specifically, the summit [declaration](#) emphasized progress in the following areas:

Practical Cooperation

NATO acknowledged and appreciated Georgia's valuable contributions to Alliance operations. The summit declaration emphasized the commencement of an intensive engagement period at a high political level to address outstanding questions

about Georgia's defensibility. This engagement was designed to facilitate Georgia's progress towards membership. Practical cooperation with NATO was focused on Georgia's interoperability and capacity to contribute to NATO-led missions, while Georgia's defense capabilities were channeled through US-Georgia bilateral formats.

Political Integration

NATO supported Georgia's aspirations for membership in the Alliance, affirming that Georgia would become a member. The summit recognized the importance of Georgia's democratic reforms and anticipated the conduct of free and fair parliamentary elections in May 2008. The MAP has been identified as the next critical step in Georgia's path to NATO membership. A significant milestone was set for December 2008 when NATO Foreign Ministers were to assess Georgia's progress and make decisions regarding the MAP application. This was a bitter-sweet outcome.

On the one hand, NATO made an unprecedented decision by giving Georgia a membership perspective. Still, on the other hand, the Allies failed to provide Georgia with a necessary tool to prepare for membership – the MAP. Russia interpreted NATO's hesitation in making Georgia's membership irreversible as the last chance to obstruct further NATO enlargement by invading the country in August 2008. A possible decision on granting MAP at the December ministerial contributed to the Kremlin's sense of urgency.

Territorial Integrity

NATO expressed deep concern over the ongoing regional conflicts in the South Caucasus, including those affecting Georgia. The summit reaffirmed NATO's unwavering support for Georgia's territorial integrity, independence, and sovereignty and pledged continued support for efforts to achieve peaceful settlements of the regional conflicts, upholding the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Warsaw Summit

The Warsaw summit in 2016 took place in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea which significantly altered the security dynamics in Eastern Europe. The summit's focus shifted towards enhancing the defensibility of NATO's Eastern Flank, reflecting the heightened security concerns. For Georgia, the Warsaw summit reiterated NATO's commitment to its eventual membership and emphasized practical cooperation through initiatives like the Defense Capacity Building Initiative and the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package. This summit also reinforced NATO's support for Georgia's territorial integrity and called on Russia to reverse its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In contrast to the Bucharest summit's stress on political aspects of Georgia's NATO integration, the emphasis was on strengthening Georgia's defense capabilities and enhancing its resilience in the face of regional security threats.

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It is important to note that at the time of the Warsaw summit, domestic political discourse in Georgia was still pro-Western, and despite some caution and indirect indications of the foreign policy alterations, the Georgian Dream's foreign and defense policy team was still firmly committed to the European and Euro-Atlantic integration. More specifically, the summit declaration emphasized progress in the following areas:

Practical Cooperation

NATO emphasized the importance of strengthening dialogue and cooperation with Georgia, par-

ticularly in ensuring security and stability in the Black Sea region. The Defense Capacity Building Initiative, adopted at the 2014 Wales summit, was acknowledged as an effective instrument for supporting Georgia's preparations for the membership. The summit acknowledged Georgia's significant contributions to NATO's common security challenges, recognizing it as an enhanced opportunities partner. NATO also highlighted the importance of the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package, initiated at the Wales summit, with over 30 experts from Allied and partner countries supporting Georgia in various areas of cooperation. The Joint Training and Evaluation Center in Georgia was assessed as operational, strengthening the country's self-defense and resilience capabilities. The summit was clearly among the most successful regarding the Alliance's practical support for building Georgia's defense capabilities.

Political Integration

The summit reaffirmed NATO's commitment to Georgia's eventual membership, first declared at the 2008 Bucharest summit. NATO recognized Georgia's significant progress since 2008 and asserted that Georgia possessed all the practical tools needed for eventual membership. The upcoming 2016 parliamentary elections were considered a crucial step towards consolidating democratic institutions. NATO encouraged Georgia to utilize opportunities provided by the NATO-Georgia Commission, the Annual National Program, and other initiatives to move closer to the Alliance. Although Georgia advocated the wording that would remove mandatory criteria for the MAP application, the summit reiterated that the MAP remained an integral part of Georgia's path to NATO membership.

Territorial Integrity

NATO remained steadfast in its support for Georgia's territorial integrity, independence, and sovereignty within its internationally recognized borders. The summit welcomed Georgia's com-

mitment not to use force and called on Russia to reciprocate. NATO urged Russia to reverse its recognition of the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, cease constructing border-like obstacles, and withdraw its forces from Georgia. The summit denounced the so-called treaties between Russia and the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as they violated Georgia's sovereignty and international law. NATO encouraged all parties involved in the Geneva talks to play constructive roles and collaborate closely with the OSCE, the UN, and the EU for peaceful conflict resolution in Georgia.

Vilnius Summit

By the time of the Vilnius summit in 2023, the context had shifted dramatically due to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the Georgian Dream's clear anti-Western stance and actions. The summit's focus was predominantly on responding to the Russian invasion of Ukraine; however, Georgia failed to comply with the Allies' stance and support for Ukraine. Nonetheless, NATO reaffirmed its support for Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, continued to call on Russia to withdraw its forces and reverse the recognition of Georgia's separatist regions. The summit acknowledged the progress in implementing the enhanced Substantial NATO-Georgia Package and highlighted new initiatives in various areas of cooperation. However, the primary emphasis remained on the broader regional security dynamics and responding to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. More specifically, the summit declaration emphasized progress in the following areas:

Practical Cooperation

NATO stated that it valued ongoing engagement with Georgia, particularly through tailored support measures and close consultations with Georgia's Foreign Minister. The summit underscored the importance of the NATO-Georgia Commission

and the ANP in enhancing political dialogue and practical cooperation. Significant progress was noted in the implementation of the enhanced Substantial NATO-Georgia Package, which included initiatives in Crisis Management, Cyber Security, Military Engineering, and Secure Communications, along with new projects in Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) Defense and Training Facilities.

Political Integration

Despite mounting anti-NATO rhetoric of the Georgian Dream leadership, the summit still reaffirmed NATO's commitment to Georgia's eventual membership in the Alliance, reiterating the decision made at the 2008 Bucharest summit. Once again, NATO emphasized that the MAP remained a critical part of Georgia's path to membership. The summit acknowledged Georgia's substantial contributions to NATO operations, which reflected its commitment and capability to contribute to Euro-Atlantic security. NATO encouraged Georgia to advance its Euro-Atlantic aspirations by progressing on critical democratic reforms and effectively utilizing the ANP.

Territorial Integrity

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called on Russia to withdraw its forces from Georgia, reverse its recognition of the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and cease the militarization and forced separation efforts in these regions. NATO also condemned human rights violations by Russia, including arbitrary detentions and harassment of Georgian citizens. The summit reinforced NATO's support for Georgia's territorial integrity and committed to ongoing efforts to strengthen Georgia's security and sovereignty.

Washington Summit and Uncertain Future

Compared to Bucharest, Warsaw, and Vilnius, the Washington summit [lacked](#) substantial content regarding NATO-Georgia relations. There were no new commitments or discussions about practical cooperation similar to Warsaw and Vilnius or an emphasis on political integration like in Bucharest. The progression from Bucharest to Warsaw shows a shift from active political engagement and integration efforts towards a focus on practical defense cooperation. In the period from the Warsaw to Vilnius summits, there was visible downplay from prioritizing practical cooperation to formally maintaining partner relations. The Washington summit's silence in Georgia signifies a troubling acceleration of the downward trend in NATO-Georgia relations.

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Even NATO's consistent and steadfast support for Georgia's territorial integrity is absent from the Washington summit's declaration. This absence of content marks a significant shift and indicates

a halt in the previous dynamics of NATO-Georgia relations. The lack of engagement on these critical issues highlights a pause in NATO's active support and strategic planning for Georgia's future within the Alliance.

The 2008 Bucharest summit's compromise language, which did not grant Georgia a MAP, was [interpreted](#) by many as a sign of NATO's weakness and indecision. This perceived vulnerability may have emboldened Russia to invade Georgia later that year, exploiting the ambiguity in NATO's stance. The Washington summit's language could be interpreted as an even more apparent abandonment of NATO's commitments toward Georgia. Depending on the dynamics of the war in Ukraine, such a signal might lead Russia to see this as an opportunity to claim a final victory over Georgia and a green light to destabilize the country and the entire region further.

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By abandoning NATO integration instead of normalizing relations with Russia, the Georgian Dream incentivizes Russian aggression against Georgia. Georgia's anti-Western policy shift jeopardizes the development of its defense capabilities and deprives itself of the chance for the long-term peaceful restoration of its territorial integrity. Georgia built relationships with NATO to the point where it was considered one of its closest partners. The Georgian Dream's reckless authoritarian push risks erasing this progress. If the current trend in NATO-Georgia relations continues, it will take decades for Georgia to reappear on NATO's agenda ■