

# Why the Georgian Political Elite Should Be Color-Blind for the Presidential Elections in the USA

**I**s it Georgia's "damned business" who will be the next president of the USA? Technically, NO, but practically YES. Obviously, Georgians have no say in the electoral process, and it is up to the American people to determine the name of their next leader. At the same time, given the power and influence of an American president on global or regional affairs, the consequences can be excessively significant for a country, a region, or the globe. From this point of view, discussion among foreign policy and security experts or political elites is legitimate, but betting on a particular candidate's win can be a self-defeating and delusional exercise for politicians. The ruling Georgian elite, headed by the Georgian Dream party and its leadership, is actively promoting the narrative that Donald Trump's victory will end the domination of the mythical "global war party," sympathize with anti-liberal sentiments worldwide, and automatically fix all problems amassed in US-Georgia relations. This is childish, to say

the least. The smartest thing the Georgian political elite can do is to remain color-blind to the US Presidential elections.

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## Spillover of American Electoral Rhetoric

One should be very careful in differentiating pre-electoral rhetoric from practical politics. Be-



**TEMURI YAKOBASHVILI**  
Contributor

Ambassador Temuri Yakobashvili distinguishes himself as an accomplished leader in government, crisis management, and diplomacy. As the founder of TY Strategies LLC, he extends advisory services globally. A pivotal figure in co-founding the Revival Foundation, aiding Ukraine, and leading the New International Leadership Institute, Yakobashvili held key roles, including Georgia's Ambassador to the U.S. and Deputy Prime Minister. With the rank of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, he is a Yale World Fellow, trained at Oxford and Harvard. As a co-founder and chair of the Governing Board of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, he actively contributes to global media discussions on regional security. His significant contributions have merited the Presidential Medal of Excellence.



fore the elections, both camps will proactively attempt to coin a negative image or narrative about the opponent by amplifying their previous real or perceived failures. Both parties' talking heads, experts, and supporting media are offering inaccurate predictions about what may happen if the opponent wins. Doomsday scenarios, primarily targeting the local electorate, often scare audiences abroad. Heated debates prevail about what will happen if Trump or Harris win and what spillover or, if you may, butterfly effect this will have on world politics. Just three months from the election date, American political pundits have more questions than answers. Putting aside domestic issues, speculations about the foreign policy priorities of competing candidates increasingly resemble reading tea leaves or coffee grounds in a cup. There is a reason for this. Trump is, by default, considered "unpredictable," and Harris has a very limited story to tell on foreign policy.

Trump's presidency was largely defined by an "unorthodox" and "revisionist" approach to foreign policy, dominated by less regard for traditional diplomacy (including diplomatic language), international institutions, or treaties. Unpleasant and undiplomatic rhetoric aside, such a shock therapy, in some cases, shook up stagnating and outdated institutions and arrangements. Trump took credit for pushing NATO allies to step up their contribution to the alliance's financing, re-negotiated NAFTA, and achieved the historic Abraham Accords between Israel and major Arab states, among other things. Several of his actions were supposed to trigger larger conflicts, but at the end of the day, nothing of that sort happened. A good example is Iran – Trump withdrew from the Iran Deal, killed top Iranian general Soleimani, moved the US Embassy to Jerusalem, and boosted cooperation with Saudi Arabia. No "predicted" catastrophe followed. Trump can claim largely ending ISIS in Syria (including the elimination of their leader,

Al Baghdadi), attempted normalization of relations with North Korea, bombed Tora Bora in Afghanistan, and negotiated with the Taliban. Trump's presidency was also marked by America's withdrawal from a number of institutions and treaties, namely the Paris Climate Agreement, the UN Human Rights Council, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and stopping funding of the UNRWA (The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) and reducing funding of the WHO, among others. All the above indicates Trump's willingness to take bold steps, employ America's might, and act decisively when it comes to foreign policy. If he wins, most likely, the same traits will continue.

We can only talk about Kamala Harris's foreign policy in association with President Biden's policy, where she did not play a leading role, ranking behind the National Security Council, the Department of State, and the CIA. Her international travels and appearances were largely symbolic and delivered messages from her boss. Hence, it is hard to judge if an independent Harris foreign policy exists. We can only speculate that, most likely, it will be determined by various influence groups serving under the Obama and Biden administrations. If that is the case, unlike Trump, both presidents were in a less aggressive foreign policy mode, leaving an aftertaste that America was disengaging from world affairs, also known as "leading from behind."

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Only the war in Ukraine and pressure from domestic groups pushed Biden's administration to re-en-

gage with traditional allies, be it on arming and supporting Ukraine or addressing climate change. The chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan and the re-erupted conflict in the Middle East further increased the necessity to focus on foreign policy. While Biden brought back "traditional" American diplomacy and predictability, fundamental American interests did not alter, and, in many cases, we have seen a continuation of legacy policies with different toolboxes and means. The list of America's adversaries and enemies has not changed, and mere association with them puts any country on the "blacklist" for any administration. That is a lesson that the Georgian leadership has somehow missed or misinterpreted.

In many regards, the current turbulent world will surely require America's leadership, and no new president can distance themselves from being dragged into the vortex of world affairs.

## Who Will Implement American Foreign Policy?

After every presidential election, approximately 4,000 political appointees should fill senior government positions across executive agencies to advance the political agenda underlined by the winning party. About 1,200 of them will require congressional approval.

During the first term of Trump's presidency, some politically moderate policy professionals associated with the Republican Party shied away from working with the Trump administration. This time, many "Never Trumpers" are eager to join Donald Trump if he wins the election. Trump's running mate, JD Vance, is an excellent example. Hence, Trump will not have a problem staffing agencies with qualified people.

It is much easier for Kamala Harris, as an incumbent Vice President. She can dive into a large pool

of current foreign policy professionals who have already coined major priorities in world affairs for America. No visible signs indicate that her attitude toward the world will fundamentally differ from what we see now. Nevertheless, it is worth noticing certain professionals who may be in charge of affairs encompassing Georgia. I will mention just a couple of names.

Stephen Biegun, former Deputy Secretary of State during George W. Bush's tenure, Trump's special envoy, and a trusted foreign policy professional may rejoin Trump's foreign policy team. Mr. Biegun commands ample knowledge of Georgia and its developments. He remains an adamant supporter of democratic Georgia and is aware of obstacles in this process.

Philip H. Gordon, the current National Security Advisor to Kamala Harris, served as Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Special Assistant to the President, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa, and the Persian Gulf Region. Mr. Gordon oversaw President Saakashvili's official visit to Washington in 2012 during the Obama administration and is intimately familiar with Georgian politics.

***Despite who leads the White House, the people in charge of foreign affairs that will ultimately include Georgia will not differ in their attitude about friends and foes and which of these two current Georgia represents.***

Naming just two names is an attempt to indicate that despite who leads the White House, the people in charge of foreign affairs that will ultimately include Georgia will not differ in their attitude about friends and foes and which of these two current Georgia represents.

## Can Changing Geopolitics Change American Attitude Towards Georgia?

American attention towards Georgia used to have two phases: active and passive. Active phases were visible during major events, such as the development of energy corridors from the Caspian to the West, Georgia's phenomenal transition from a "failed state" to the "beacon of freedom," and the war with Russia. Passive phases have entailed less attention but have continued support of Georgia's independence, development, and democratization. Unfortunately, currently, we are experiencing a third and unprecedented phase – a hostile one. At the same time, hostility is targeted towards the ruling elite of Georgia and not towards the people or the country of Georgia. The hostile attitude is the result of the incomprehensible political games, the rhetoric, and the actions of the Georgian Dream and its leadership, allegedly avoiding dragging Georgia into military conflict or protecting "Georgia's sovereignty" from Western encroachment. Both are very questionable propositions since the country is being deliberately pushed into the Russian/Chinese orbit, one which cares much less about sovereignty, peace, or independence.

It should be noted that the above-mentioned hostility is definitely not the result of the actions and decisions of either one specific agency (e.g., the Department of State), administration (Biden's administration), or group of disenchanted NGOs, think tanks, and academia. Critical voices from the administration merely reflect the bipartisan mood in Congress, criticism from major media outlets, unfavorable assessments of think tanks, negative conclusions of international NGOs, and similar sentiments from European allies, be it from Brussels or individual member countries.

Warnings and stern statements by US and European officials are already followed by concrete punitive actions. On 23 May 2024, Secretary Blinken [announced](#) a comprehensive review of all US-Georgia relations and introduced a visa restriction policy towards Georgian officials for “undermining democracy in Georgia.” On 3 June 2024, the US Congress [adopted](#) the “Megobari Act,” introduced and supported by representatives of both political parties, obliging the administration to take punitive actions against the government of Georgia. On 5 July 2024, the Department of Defense indefinitely [postponed](#) the Noble Partner joint military exercises, apparently finding the Georgian partner as not so noble. On 31 July 2024, Secretary of State Antony Blinken also [announced](#) a freeze of around USD 95 million in support, whose direct beneficiary was the government of Georgia.

Further punitive measures are in the pipeline and can be enacted as soon as necessary. All of this is happening in parallel with the EU halting Georgia's EU membership talks while other countries, like Ukraine and Moldova, are significantly advancing. The EU and several member countries [froze](#) significant assistance to Georgia, whether in direct financial aid, development projects, or bilateral cooperation in various spheres, including the military.

## Has America Abandoned Georgia?

The simple answer to that question is – no! The myth of American isolationism, even if it can somehow be practically implemented, may only extend to regions where American interests are less prevalent or negligible. Georgia surely does not fit into that category.

All of the above punitive measures are supplemented by [statements](#) or policies that as soon as

Georgia returns to the democratic path, relationships can return to normality, and the US pledges to enact an “active” phase in the relationship. The geopolitical legacy that the upcoming administration will inherit, the war in Ukraine, the explosive Middle East, and an assertive China make a democratic and Western-oriented Georgia even more relevant and attractive. The relationship with Georgia was fostered during various US administrations, whether Democratic or Republican. Billions of US dollars have been invested in this process, and Ivanishvili's political “geopolitical maneuvers” are considered a temporary hiccup. US officials, starting from the Ambassador to Georgia, repeatedly [indicate](#) that relations can quickly be fixed once anti-democratic steps are reversed and anti-Western policies are altered.

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Georgian domestic politics aside, new realities in the region, namely, increasingly pro-Western Armenia, challenging Iran, and Central Asia squeezed between Russia and China, require Georgia to be in the family of Western nations. It overlaps with the wishes of the people of Georgia, whose majority still aspires to join the EU and NATO. Any obstacles to that process automatically become a blood clot that will require “medical” intervention to remove. If the current Ukrainian affairs absorb most of the American attention in the region, stabilization of the Ukrainian issue in any form (ceasefire, agreement, etc.) will allow the American bureaucracy to re-zoom attention back on Georgia and remedy the current shortfalls.

## My Way or the Highway?

The question remains if the hopes of the Georgian Dream that they can have it their way without practically and verifiably changing course are realistic. They believe that they can, hoping that if Donald Trump is re-elected and if he ends the war in Ukraine and gets in cahoots with Russia – too many “ifs” and too little reality. Anyone familiar with the US bureaucracy and policy-making procedures can testify that accumulated sanctions, congressional resolutions, adverse media, critical academia, and hurt businesses do not change their minds overnight toward accumulated negativity. The time factor remains even more relevant – depending on the configuration of the new Congress and Senate, the approval, placement, and functionality of 1,200 newly appointed senior officials will take at least six months from the inauguration of the newly elected president. After that, new policies will require formulation, fine-tuning, calibration, and testing unless things can be reversed into already functional previous policies. Any new appointees will inherit the damage inflicted by the Georgian Dream on bilateral relations and negligible (if any) trust in the current Georgian political regime. Add to that the well-established factor that Donald Trump considers Eastern Europe primarily a European responsibility. Hence, Europe has to be

convinced to repair relations with Georgia in parallel with similar American wishes. Therefore, the Georgian Dream ruling elite cannot seriously hope to reset relations with the US without fundamentally U-turning their domestic and foreign policy, even if that U-turn is practically feasible.

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Georgians have a saying: “You better bruise your head than bruise your good name.” Relations are built on trust, and it looks like trust in the current Georgian leadership is not only bruised but irreparably shattered. Under normal circumstances, speculations about the possible results of the American presidential elections would mean an active or passive phase for Georgia. Given today's realities, whoever leads the new US administration, Georgia's task is not to adjust to active or passive phases but to fix and avert the negative. That can happen not with a change in the US administration or geopolitics but only with a change in Georgia's political leadership ■