

Awakening Georgia's NATO Prospects

Sixteen years ago, in April 2008, at the NATO Summit in Bucharest, the Allies agreed that Georgia would become a NATO member. This decision has been reconfirmed at all 12 successive NATO summits since then. The Alliance [stands](#) firm in its support for Georgia's right to decide its future and foreign policy, while Georgia's constitution [tasks](#) authorities to ensure the full integration of Georgia into NATO. However, translating these two-sided best intentions into tangible integration progress has proven difficult.

Russia currently displays its usual [hostility](#) to Georgia's active collaboration with NATO and the United States. Russia has effectively employed a coercive [hybrid strategy](#) affecting the Georgian government's decision-making calculus. The consecutive governments of Georgia considered seeking refuge in the Euro-Atlantic alliance the sole viable option for mitigating the risk of Russian aggression. However, the Georgian Dream Government has shifted the approach, suggesting a strat-

egy of aligning with the perceived threat posed by Russia to [prevent](#) military conflict. Consequently, the Georgian Dream's once confident narratives regarding NATO integration have waned, resulting in a noticeable deceleration in NATO-Georgia relations.

Given the deteriorating security environment surrounding Georgia, there is a pressing need to reinvigorate Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration prospects.

The war in Ukraine has significantly worsened the security landscape in the wider Black Sea region, and Georgia is facing a severe security deficit. In response to the new security environment, Sweden and Finland reversed their decades-long non-alignment traditions in favor of NATO, which was met with relatively muted Russian displeasure. But, even though NATO enlargement returned



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Inspired by NATO's 'Protect the Future' mural in Vilnius, Lithuania, 2024.

to the agenda, Georgia's approximation chances were not affected. Georgia-NATO relations have regrettably devolved into bureaucratic exchanges between Brussels and Tbilisi. Despite consistently high public support, currently [estimated](#) at 65%, political discourse on NATO membership within Georgia has receded in recent years. Given the deteriorating security environment surrounding Georgia, there is a pressing need to reinvigorate Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration prospects.

Integration vs Partnership

Relations with NATO can be viewed through two prisms - the process of integration/accesion and the process of practical cooperation. The integration in NATO is a complex process with interdependent political and practical components. The political element of integration entails making essential decisions on advancing aspiring coun-

tries through different levels of cooperation, integration formats, or formal statuses. The practical component, in its essence, is aimed at implementing political decisions and consists of establishing and executing specific cooperation initiatives, capacity-building programs, and interoperability measures. Democratic reforms are considered essential criteria for the Allies to assess the readiness of the partners to advance in the political aspect of integration. In parallel, successful practical cooperation delivers increased defensibility, resilience, and interoperability and thus supports political integration.

The only formal precondition for NATO membership is enshrined in the open door principle of [Article 10](#) of the founding Washington Treaty: "The Parties may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede

to this Treaty.” The [Study on NATO Enlargement](#) elaborated in 1995, further explains the purpose and principles of enlargement; however, there are no universally applicable formal criteria for membership or a uniform integration process that can fit all candidate countries. In contrast to North Macedonia’s decade-long effort, Finland’s swift accession to NATO is the most recent proof that NATO integration is a highly customized political process.

The complexity of NATO’s integration process is well reflected in [five chapters](#) of the Membership Action Plan (MAP), which is a practical tool to help candidate countries achieve NATO standards in all vital areas of state building: political and economic, defense and military, resources, security, and legal issues. The process and timeline of integration depend on how Allies perceive the candidate’s readiness and level of development in all these areas, case by case.

In the case of Georgia, at the 2008 Bucharest Summit, the MAP was declared as the “next step on Georgia’s way towards membership.” The 2015 NATO Foreign Ministerial declaration states that MAP is an “integral part of the integration process.” Georgia has already implemented 15 cycles of the Annual National Program ([ANP](#)), which is the exact mirror of the Annual National Plan – a primary document for overseeing reforms under the MAP process. The process and the content of the two documents are identical. Thereby, the MAP is an expression of the political decision rather than an additional set of practical obligations.

Furthermore, in 2015, the Allies agreed that Georgia had all the practical tools to prepare for eventual membership through the two additional formats – the NATO Georgia Commission ([NGC](#)) and the NATO Georgia Substantial Package ([SNGP](#)). However, the final path of Georgia’s integration process is still unclear. Whether Georgia still requires the Membership Action Plan or whether the

current instruments suffice is still a matter of debate, something which currently is muted due to the generally lowered interest in the NATO integration topic in Tbilisi.

An important aspect serving as an obstacle to NATO membership was the state of democracy in Georgia. Rhetorically, the Allies often commended Georgia’s substantial progress in democratic reforms. Still, the assessments [always](#) noted that much work remained to be done, implying that the progress achieved in implementing (primarily judiciary and electoral) reforms was insufficient for getting Georgia to the next level in the integration process. A perception of Georgia’s current democratic performance by NATO closely echoes the state of implementation of EU recommendations and is affected by the tense relations with various EU stakeholders, at times [raising](#) “grave concerns over the lack of substantial progress and further negative developments in Georgia concerning democratic standards and the rule of law.” Currently, NATO [links](#) the Allies’ expectations of democratic reforms with the EU’s [nine recommended steps](#) and refers to the reforms that must be carried out within the EU framework as also necessary for NATO accession. At the 2023 Vilnius Summit, Allies were [clear](#) that “to advance its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, Georgia must make progress on reforms, including key democratic reforms, and make best use of the ANP.”

In contrast with political aspects, Georgia’s practical [cooperation](#) with NATO manifested through participation in exercises, missions, and capacity-building programs has been regarded as remarkable and exemplary throughout the last two decades. However, in parallel to the hindered political process of Georgia’s NATO accession, Georgia’s practical cooperation has also come to a low point in 2023. This could be noticed in the important and measurable domain of cooperation – participation in NATO-led operations and exercises.

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Historically, Georgia has been actively involved in NATO-led operations, providing troops to KFOR in Kosovo from 1999 to 2008, being one of the most significant non-NATO contributors to the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan and one of the top overall contributors to the follow-on Resolute Support Mission (2015-2021). Georgia's consistent involvement and suffered losses have symbolized its commitment to international security and cooperation with NATO. Georgia also contributed to counter-terrorist maritime surveillance in the Mediterranean through Operation Active Endeavour and has supported maritime situational awareness in Operation Sea Guardian since 2016. However, after the termination of Western involvement in Afghanistan, Georgia lost the status of a significant contributor to international security - its serious advantage in the NATO integration process.

Georgia has regularly participated in multinational exercises led by NATO and the Allies. In 2023, Georgia [hosted](#) two significant exercises: "Agile Spirit 2023," - a multinational military exercise designed to strengthen defense capabilities through joint training and cooperation among NATO member and partner countries, and "Maple Arch" command and post-international exercise aimed at increasing partners' interoperability with NATO. In 2022, Georgia also [engaged](#) in a "Noble Partner" US-led biannual exercise promoting the readiness of Georgia's defense forces. This exercise was strongly condemned by Russia in an official [statement](#) as a threat to national and regional security.

Regrettably, in 2023, Georgia decided not to [participate](#) in the multinational exercise "Defender 23," involving over 15,000 troops from more than 20 Allied and partner nations. The Ministry of Defense justified opting out of "Defender 23" with the need to optimize resources for participation in other large-scale military exercises. However, this decision was viewed in the context of Tbilisi's cooling relations with the West and Russia's reaction to "Noble Partner," casting a shadow on Georgia's decade-long status as a reliable partner.

The NATO integration process also involves a bureaucratic layer in which the political and practical components are shaped. This dimension keeps practical initiatives rolling under concrete frameworks, which, in Georgia's case, is the SNGP. In December 2020, a refreshed SNGP was [adopted](#) with updated timelines and ambitions. The comprehensive upgrade encompassed various domains such as air, land, sea, and cyberspace, covering tactical, operational, and strategic levels, and comprised 16 initiatives, including three added in 2020 to enhance Georgia's military medical capacity, English language training, and codification and standardization systems. The 2023 Vilnius Summit introduced additional initiatives in crisis management, cyber security, military engineering, secure communications, training facilities, and chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear defense. Currently, these capacity-building programs are one of the few areas where NATO-Georgia cooperation can be considered intensive.

The bureaucratic layer is essential in maintaining institutional and human contacts between NATO and Georgian officials. Through this interaction, official communication takes place on all political, practical, and bureaucratic aspects. Choosing the right words and forms of communication, which adequately reflect the real state of relations between NATO and Georgia and resonate with the positions of all NATO member states, is a time-consuming but important part of business.

This bureaucratic exercise can affect the process of integration and even influence public perceptions and the speed of reforms. Currently, maintaining high-level personal contacts and positive narratives about NATO-Georgia relations are becoming increasingly challenging, directly affecting political and practical aspects of the integration process and dramatically increasing the burden of maintaining relations on the bureaucratic layer.

Even at the declarative level, the Georgian Dream exhibits uncertainty and a lack of commitment to invest in achieving immediate progress in the integration process. In 2022, former Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili [suggested](#) that Georgia first has to solve its territorial conflicts with Moscow before joining NATO. Later, in 2023, he [added](#) that NATO enlargement was one of the main reasons why Russia started the war in Ukraine, explaining why his government is hesitant about NATO. However, in December 2023, a parliamentary del-

egation visiting NATO HQ in Brussels requested more clarity on the NATO integration process and pushed for a specific schedule and membership criteria. Contradicting Gharibashvili's statements and ignoring the need for further democratic reforms, the delegation [stated](#) that the country is ready for NATO membership, the ball is in the Alliance's court, and Georgia expects matching steps and a fair decision within a reasonable time. New Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze's dry [statement](#) after his meeting with the Secretary-General on February 21, 2024, during his first foreign visit to Brussels, once again attested to the lack of Georgia's result-oriented strategy towards NATO integration.

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NATO Integration Process

Practical Cooperation	Political Integration
May 1997 Georgia became a member of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council	August 1999 Georgian contingent deployed in KFOR
November 2002 Georgia made a declaration on its aspiration to NATO membership	October 2004 Georgian joins operation in Afghanistan
June 2004 Georgia joined "Individual Partnership Action Plan"	October 2010 SecGen visit to Georgia
February 2005 NATO Liaison Officer for the South Caucasus was assigned to Georgia	November 2011 SecGen and NAC visit to Georgia
June 2006 launch of the Intensified Dialogue with Georgia on NATO membership issues	November 2013 SecGen and NAC visit to Georgia

NATO Integration Process

Practical Cooperation	Political Integration
<p><i>April 2008</i> Allies agreed that Georgia will become a member of NATO</p>	<p><i>February 2014</i> NATO Military Committee visit to Georgia</p>
<p><i>September 2008</i> NATO-Georgia Commission was established</p>	<p><i>August 2015</i> SecGen visit and opening of JTEC</p>
<p><i>December 2008</i> Development of Annual National Program has started</p>	<p><i>September 2016</i> NAC visit to Georgia</p>
<p><i>May 2012</i> Georgia was mentioned as a NATO aspirant partner country</p>	<p><i>March 2017</i> Military Committee visit to Georgia</p>
<p><i>September 2014</i> Allies have endorsed a Substantial NATO-Georgia Package</p>	<p><i>May 2017</i> NATO Parliamentary Assembly visit to Georgia <i>March 2019</i> NATO –Georgia Exercise in JTEC</p>
<p><i>December 2015</i> Allies declared that Georgia has all practical tools to prepare for the eventual membership</p>	<p><i>March 2019</i> NATO SecGen visit to Georgia</p>
<p>⊗</p>	<p><i>March 2019</i> NATO Military Committee visit to Georgia</p>
<p>⊗</p>	<p><i>October 2019</i> NATO NAC visit to Georgia</p>
<p>⊗</p>	<p><i>September 2021</i> NATO ship's port call in Batumi</p>
<p>⊗</p>	<p><i>October 2021</i> NATO Military Committee visit to Georgia</p>
<p>⊗</p>	<p><i>October 2022</i> NATO-Georgia exercise in JTEC</p>
<p>⊗</p>	<p><i>September 2023</i> Georgia joined Operation Sea Guardian</p>
<p>⊗</p>	<p><i>July 2023</i> SNGP enhanced and extended</p>
<p>⊗</p>	<p><i>November 2023</i> NATO Military Committee visit to Georgia</p>

Way Ahead

Russia's unprovoked war in Ukraine made it clear that only NATO's further enlargement in the Black Sea region can be a stabilizing factor for regional security. The only way for the West to avoid establishing new dividing lines and spheres of influence in Europe and contain Russia's aggression is to pursue its strategic agenda for a better and safer Europe.

Just as the EU made a geopolitical decision to grant Georgia candidate status, NATO needs to make a strategic decision and move Georgia's integration forward. Despite the Georgian government's hesitation, the Allies should acknowledge Georgia's national interests fixed in constitutional determination, the Georgian people's overwhelming support for NATO, and the sacrifices in NATO-led missions. A tangible step forward in Georgia's NATO integration process would further convey that strengthening the rule-based security system is still crucial for NATO and that challenging the borders of sovereign European states by military force can never become an effective foreign policy weapon.

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Given the ongoing declining dynamics in NATO-Georgia relations and the absence of Georgia's ambitions, making significant decisions on Georgia's integration processes is very difficult. At this point, a realistic strategic objective would be to keep Georgia in enlargement discussions, minimize damage to NATO-Georgia relations, and prepare grounds for Georgia's NATO membership through honest discussions on all the outstanding

political issues impeding progress in integration. These objectives can be achieved with greater involvement with Georgia's pro-democracy forces and vastly pro-Western civil society, even if official authorities are hesitant to actively pursue the NATO membership agenda.

Granting the Membership Action Plan seems to be the only logical and tangible continuation of Georgia's NATO integration process, even if it is too overdue. At the 2023 Vilnius Summit, Allies reiterated the decision made at the 2008 Bucharest Summit that Georgia would become a member of the Alliance with the MAP as an integral part of the process and reaffirmed all elements of that decision and subsequent decisions. However, in the case of Ukraine, the alliance recognized that Ukraine's path to full Euro-Atlantic integration has moved beyond the need for the Membership Action Plan. This decision, in addition to the quick accession of Finland and Sweden to the Alliance, strips the MAP of its political relevance. Therefore, since Georgia already has all the practical instruments to prepare for membership, there is no reason to withhold the MAP any longer.

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MAP does not offer any security guarantee. However, it can indicate the irreversibility of the accession without prejudice to the final decision on the time and modalities of membership. If granted, MAP will provide a legitimate and secure platform for defining the terms of eventual membership, leaving less space for conspiracy theories, disinformation, and speculations on the timelines and criteria of membership. Even an indication about the possibility of granting the MAP to Georgia will invigorate content-oriented discussions in Georgia's political discourse. It will equip pro-Western stakeholders with the rhetorical ammunition

to demand merit-based progress and democratic reforms from the Georgian authorities. If granted, the MAP can be a solid framework for scrutinizing and advocating democratic reforms in Georgia.

It is critical that Georgia's NATO integration process is not held hostage to Russian occupation. Therefore, there is an urgent need to decouple Georgia's NATO accession from the process of de-occupation of Georgia's territories. The Allied decision to acknowledge the fact of illegal occupation of Georgia's regions and adopt appropriate language in NATO documents is key in this regard. NATO and all Allies already unequivocally support Georgia's territorial integrity. NATO regularly calls on Russia to reverse its recognition of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region of Georgia as independent states and to withdraw its forces from Georgia. Most NATO countries de jure condemned the illegal occupation of Georgian territories. Thus, it would be logical if the Allies acknowledged Georgia's regions as occupied in the next NATO Summit's statement.

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To support Georgia's peaceful conflict resolution strategy, maintaining the non-recognition policy of the Alliance is vital. The key controversial aspect of the occupation in the context of Georgia's NATO integration is the possible (non) application of the military component of Article 5 to the territories that are currently under effective Russian control. Recognition of Georgia's territories as occupied can pave the way to the discussions on the conditionality of the partial, non-military application of Article 5 to the occupied regions of Georgia without undermining Georgia's territorial integrity and without ending up in a military confrontation with Russia immediately upon Georgia's entry. Some Allies hesitate to support Georgia's membership because of this reason. Thus, the discussions about how the occupied regions could be partially and temporarily excluded from the scope of Article 5 could dispel the concerns of these Allies ■