

Belt and Rope

Political scientists tend to find natural science jargon applicable and helpful in describing events and processes in its domain. Concepts like “tectonic shift” or “fault lines” not only refer to earthquakes but to political events as well. While atmospheric climate change and its consequences are hotly debated political issues, political climates and atmospheres are no less discussed, affecting billions of people’s lives. In atmospheric climate change, the dominance of the human factor is still disputed, although political climates are 100% man-made.

The same is true for Georgia’s foreign policy. Georgia is at the “fault line” of international politics; the August 2008 Georgia-Russia war indeed caused “tectonic shifts” in the region, and the bloody events of 9 April 1989 started the “perfect storm” that precipitated the demise of the Soviet Union. While those events took place in Georgia, they resulted from a certain international political climate, which also affected Georgian society and territory.

Any political climate is not only man-made but is also always influenced by external factors (like any

climate). For small countries like Georgia, external factors play a disproportionately exuberant role. Examining these external factors can be instrumental in understanding what options are feasible for Georgia’s political, economic, and security policies and what can/should be done to achieve these strategic policy goals.

Political Climate Around Georgia

Several factors determine today’s international political climate around Georgia. First of all, it is the Russian revisionist policy in the neighborhood resulting in military aggression against Georgia and Ukraine and the occupation of approximately 20% of the land of both countries. In parallel, the long-lasting leader of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, changed the core nature of the Turkish state and its projection of power around it. One can credit such a policy to Azerbaijan’s ability to regain Nagorno-Karabakh and solve the decades-long territorial conflict with Armenia. This fact causes understandable envy among those who have similar problems with secessionist and occupied regions.



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.



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Chinese influence has also been dramatically growing but has not yet materialized in any noteworthy political or economic gravitas. Even though Iranian influence is spreading in the Middle East, its leadership mainly avoids the so-called “Russian periphery,” with sporadic exceptions of Azerbaijan (ethnic Azerbaijanis are a formidable factor inside Iran) and Armenia, with whom Iran has a narrow

land border. Washington looks at the Black Sea and the Caucasus mainly through the prism of the Ukrainian-Russian war with little residual factors like the war against terrorism (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq), energy policies (diversification of hydrocarbon supplies from the Caspian basin), and increasingly fading efforts to spread democracy and good governance.

About a Belt

It is easily observable that similar political and economic climates proliferate in homogeneous environments. Sometimes, it takes the shape of a big chunk of adjacent territories that stretches like a strip, forming a kind of “belt.” The “Rust Belt” in the US is a conglomerate of former industrial powerhouse states that declined due to a change in an “economic climate” where misery and crime have replaced economic growth. The “Rust Belt” (and allegedly the invention of the air-conditioner) caused the creation of the “Sun Belt,” where

most of the industrial labor immigrated and found economic prosperity. Unlike an economic “belt,” the late Henry Kissinger introduced the notion of the “Shia Belt,” a political/ideological/religious “belt” encompassing Muslim states with a significant Shia population (Iran, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon), also known as the “Shia Crescent.” The Chinese “Belt and Road Initiative” incorporates both economic and political factors in its calculus to promote infrastructure development and revitalize the Silk Road. When the European Union launched the European Neighborhood Policy in 2004, it also thought in terms of a belt of states adjacent to the newly enlarged EU, from Belarus down to the Middle East and all the way to Morocco through Northern Africa.

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Historically, on the peripheries of various empires, Georgia often found itself as a part of a “belt” circling the furthest outposts of a given empire. Feeling uncomfortable under imposed rules, Georgians often rebelled and never wasted an opportunity to get out of the “belt” by hitting below the oppressors’ belts. An independent Georgia found a chance to choose in what kind of a “belt” its national interests could be better protected. The proliferation of security, political stability, and economic prosperity among new members of the EU and NATO made Georgia’s choice obvious. At the same time, Georgia, together with Moldova, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan, found itself in a non-voluntary belt, dividing NATO/EU and CSTO/Eurasian Economic Union. It is an uncomfortable area that Russia calls its exclusive sphere of interest and challenges militarily as a battleground for revising the world order.

About a Rope

Many of Russia’s neighbors took the “my hands are tied” stance after the collapse of the Soviet Union, implying the existence of limited or no geopolitical choice. Invisible or visible ropes intertwined the economies and political systems of the former Soviet states, even after they regained their independence. Russian military influence still extended beyond Russian borders, and economic levers were more than enough to exert pressure. Where these means did not work, ethnic and territorial conflicts were instrumentalized.

Most importantly, decolonization from the Russian/Soviet empire was (and still is) taking place in the areas geographically adjacent to the former metropole, unlike in the cases of other European empires whose colonies were overseas. This geographic proximity produced rudimentary ropes, knitting the former empire together and making its rupture more difficult. Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan found themselves (stuck) between the European and Euro-Atlantic world to the west and the Russian World (Russkii Mir) to the north and east. Bound together with the invisible post-imperial links, they started walking a tight rope westward with fits and starts, hanging in the air, holding on to each other and the ropes that bound them, hoping to finally reach and ground themselves in the global West. Very soon, all four of them found out that political, economic, and security “tightrope walking” requires not just enormous strength and mastery but, most importantly - full cooperation and a permissive international climate.

Region vs. Neighborhood

The most conducive climate for the cooperation of Eastern Partnership and South Caucasus States would be the accelerated integration into the European and Transatlantic institutions. Previous en-

largements have seen countries aligning regionally, like the Visegrad, Baltic, or Nordic groups. Many European allies naively expected the same model from the three countries of the South Caucasus. However, the South Caucasus is not really a political region due to the divergent political, economic, or cultural/religious affinities. While Georgia aspires towards Western integration (EU, NATO), Azerbaijan's cooperation with the West is more of an "à la carte" type rather than the "preset menu," cherry-picking the areas of mutual interest (like energy, transportation, etc.). Azerbaijan is also in a military alliance with a NATO member (Türkiye) and is a part of the Non-Alignment Movement and the Organization of Islamic States. Until now, Armenia has been firmly embedded in Russo-centric political, economic, and cultural establishments (CSTO, Eurasian Economic Union), even though Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has recently been trying to change the country's course.

As Antoine de Saint-Exupéry once said: "Love does not consist of gazing at each other but looking outward together in the same direction." Countries of the South Caucasus certainly do not look outward in the same direction, with one looking west (US and EU), one north (Russia), and one south (Türkiye/Islamic world), and probably through the peripheral vision, all looking to the east at China. It is not a pleasant vision for a political region.

Meanwhile, the regional powers neighboring the South Caucasus treat the region for what it is – the neighborhood. Russia calls the region the "near abroad," the EU calls it the "eastern neighborhood," and for Türkiye, it is part of the Black Sea neighborhood and a gate to the Turkic-speaking nations in the North Caucasus and Central Asia. Countries of the region also behave towards each other in the same manner as "normal neighbors" – sometimes quarreling, sometimes cooperating, and eventually finding ways of coexistence and cooperation.

Gentrification of the Region

Prosperous neighbors make an affluent neighborhood. Unlike traditional gentrification, in political "gentrification," you do not need to resettle aboriginal dwellers; instead, you make their presence more valuable to other neighbors, increasing the value of the entire neighborhood. Georgia's transformation from a "country of bribes and tribes" into a mostly corruption-free country affected and encouraged its neighbors. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and other regional countries today pride themselves in corruption-free, one-stop public service centers modeled after Georgia's public service halls.

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Prosperity and stability have spill-over effects in the neighboring states and regions. When Georgia dropped the visa requirements for citizens of Russia in 2010, residents of the Northern Caucasus very soon rediscovered their immediate neighborhood in the south, which for centuries has served as one of the centers for the education and incubation of their national elites.

When Azerbaijan and Georgia agreed to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline project in the late 1990s, creating the infrastructure to deliver Azerbaijani oil and gas to Europe, economic prosperity and stability of the region and pragmatic friendly relations between Georgia and Azerbaijan also grew, attracting investments and leading to the increased trade and other infrastructure projects, such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway.

For years, the permissive, corruption-free environment in Georgia was utilized by the Central Asian and South Caucasus states to re-export cars and equipment from Georgia, leading to the ex-

port of cars becoming the major export item for Georgia. With current economic sanctions against Russia, Central Asian countries find it increasingly attractive to use transportation corridors through the Caucasus, relying heavily on the Georgian Black Sea ports.

By the same token, if Georgia manages to build the deep sea Anaklia port and Azerbaijan and Armenia agree to open connectivity routes through the Caucasus, the spill-over effect in the wider region will be tremendous and long-lasting.

“The Mission Determines the Coalition”

These famous words of the late Donald Rumsfeld, former US Secretary of Defense, remain very relevant for Georgia's choices. For Georgia to become a desired and valuable neighbor, it must achieve its national objective to become a member of the EU and NATO. In this quest, the obvious coalition partners are Ukraine and Moldova. The value that Georgia can bring to the EU and NATO derives from its geography, transit potential, energy security, and genuinely good relations with the countries to its east and south.

Eventually, it will be a two-way street – democratic, prosperous, and stable Georgia, which is an EU and NATO member, will be a much-preferred partner for Armenia, Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Central Asian countries, and even China. The same is true for the Middle Eastern powers whose investments in Georgia have followed the trajectory of democracy in Georgia.

If the political and intellectual sages of the region were to go back to the drawing board, they would easily arrive at an institutional construct that still somehow exists, headquartered in Kyiv, consisting of most of the countries interested in a political or economic coalition with Georgia. Such an organi-

zation is GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova), which was created in 1997 with an aim to counter Russia's influence in its neighborhood; however, the decades of bumpy relations among its members, as well as out-of-sync governments and their foreign policy priorities, relegated GUAM to the back of priority organizations for all members.

Now might be high time to think about revitalizing GUAM with a new mission and proactive programs in practical dimensions. Undoubtedly, the GUAM-2 can be relevant only after the war between Russia and Ukraine ends. Nevertheless, deliberation on the shape of such a project's future can start right now.

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Undoubtedly, a major determining factor for the renewed GUAM framework will be related to how the war ends. Nevertheless, essential aspects of reinvigorated cooperation can be elaborated by experts from all interested sides and NATO and EU allies. Even if most or some of the GUAM-2 members end up in the EU and NATO, valuable forms of cooperation could be reinforced, not substituted; hence, such an endeavor could have a longer life span than any ad hoc arrangement.

After the events in Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenian political leadership started a re-evaluation of its strategic partnership with Russia, as Thorniké Gordadze explains in this volume. More efforts to reach a peace agreement with Azerbaijan, normalize its relationship with Türkiye, and accelerate collaboration with the West are not only visible but may bring fruits as well. If that happens, Armenia may find the idea of joining GUAM-2 quite compelling.

Developments in Belarus may not give a lot of hope, but the discontent of the population not-so-long-ago and increasing dependence on weakening Russia may eventually result in some kind of regime change, and Belarus, too, may find it more attractive to be in a GUAM-2 type political clubs.

In any case, at this moment, for all neighbors of Russia, one thing must be clear: as long as the leader of Russia, Vladimir Putin, feels like a superman in the driving seat, none of his neighbors have the luxury of feeling safe because, as Muhammad Ali once said: “Superman don’t need no seat belt!”

The Soviet Union had already tried to catch up with the West and “surpass” it while simultaneously portraying that the West was heading to the edge of a cliff. Everyone remembers how that race ended. Putin’s recent reckless thrust to again outmaneuver the West is already costing dearly to everybody around and in Russia. With this policy, Russia is steadily pushing itself into Chinese servitude and off another cliff. It is highly doubtful

that other countries of the former Soviet Union, including the Central Asian states, want to follow Russia into China’s orbit. This is why five Central Asian states are attempting to form a regional co-operation mechanism. It might be time to think of the same approach in the European neighborhood of Russia.

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One thing is clear: whatever crazy military or political strategies Russian leaders may conceive, a new geopolitical belt is tightening around Russia. It seems that the neighboring nations have already tested their ropes and gained valuable experience, akin to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s wise counsel: “When you reach the end of your rope, tie a knot in it and hang on” ■