

No Place to Lay His Head: Dilemma of Alliances in the State of War

“Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”

Luke 9:58

Europe is struck by war, the type it never expected to re-occur, the one with water-filled trenches, artillery duels, thousands of soldiers dead, countless civilians massacred, with wholesale, wanton destruction of civilian infrastructure and the aggressor’s express intent to end the sovereignty of one of Europe’s largest states. For the politicians, this reality is impossible to ignore, even as those geographically farthest from the scene of hostilities try to reassure their populations. But those closer to the flaming fault line are spurred by their people to do something, to act, to make sure that a similar fate does not befall their cities and their children. The idea of military alliances and bilateral or multilateral security assurances, which to many in Europe seemed a vestige of the barbaric 20th century, is back in vogue.

But which kind of military alliances and security assurances can be counted on to provide security in the current circumstances? What good are bilateral alliances? And what are Georgia’s options?

The Golden Standard

A multilateral military alliance underpinned by nuclear-capable states is the golden standard of security assurance. No wonder Finland and Sweden – the two countries that, incidentally, continued to invest in defense and security through the fat and calm European 1980s and 1990s – went for the ultimate umbrella of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).



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But this option is not for everyone; it requires military readiness, democratic virtue, and an appropriate opportunity. Both Finland and Sweden have invested in interoperability with other NATO states for decades. They have potent military forces and a military-industrial complex that makes their membership a net asset for the Alliance. They are contiguous to the NATO states and defensible militarily. And crucially, they are above all doubt when it comes to the democratic credentials and stability of their institutions. Also, quite importantly, a significant portion of their populations is mentally prepared to accept both the possibility of war and that averting it requires a concerted effort of the state and its citizens – both as individuals and members of other organizations, including businesses.

Yet, as we have all witnessed, even for those two countries, the road to the alliance has not been without a hitch. Türkiye and Hungary have used the critical moment to extract political and security concessions, adding the element of acrimony and mistrust to the NATO family at the very moment when unity was of the essence. Still, the flags of Sweden and Finland are proudly flying in front of the NATO Brussels headquarters, despite these complications.

A “Gold Plus” Option

For the countries that are too close to the aggressor and the perimeter of war, even NATO membership per se is not sufficiently reassuring. Considerably smaller than Finland by population, GDP, and [military capability](#), Lithuania opted to complement its multilateral shield with [a bilateral deal with Germany](#) to station a full-size brigade on its soil by 2027. This marks the first time since the end

of WWII that Berlin will be permanently stationing the troops abroad. It is also a qualitatively significant upgrade from the NATO-led deployments of the Western European “tripwire” military forces along the Eastern edge of the Alliance. But even those have grown: France’s NATO battle group in Romania is already 800-strong and includes its *Rafale* fighters.

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Both Lithuania and Romania fall into the group of countries like Estonia, Latvia, and Bulgaria that want to see their military capabilities supercharged quickly but still are becoming painfully aware that without an external military presence and tangible security guarantees, they may become a tempting target for the Kremlin if it decides to test the validity of NATO’s Article 5 commitment on mutual defense.

In the Thick of It

While the current NATO members and those with discernible avenues towards the membership seek to enhance their defenses, the condition of those states that have no immediate prospects of getting under the collective defense umbrella is more fraught. The Russian saying goes that penury is rich in inventions. What are the tactics that Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan are deploying to bridge their security concerns?

Ukraine: Learning Hard Lessons

Ukraine is, on the face of it, a textbook cautionary tale against “soft” multilateral security guarantees, even if they look ironclad. At the time when

the USSR dissolved, Ukraine was a nuclear-armed state with strategic aviation, tactical nuclear missiles, and a navy in its arsenal. Kyiv gave them up in exchange for joint security guarantees from the United States, Russia, and the United Kingdom.

Under the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, the three major powers [undertook](#) an “obligation to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine, and that none of their weapons will ever be used against Ukraine except in self-defense or otherwise in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.” Not only has Russia blatantly violated its solemn obligation - twice - but the other two parties discovered that they had no serious leverage against Russia bestowed by the Memorandum. The text spoke only of the obligation “to seek immediate United Nations Security Council action,” which, in case of aggression by the Security Council member, had come to naught.

But Ukraine is also a case in point for security flip-flopping. It started out its independent statehood with military neutrality. A brief stint after the “Orange Revolution,” when Kyiv sought to shelter under the NATO umbrella, resulted in 2008 “non-admission admission” in the [Bucharest Memorandum](#) that Ukraine (and Georgia) “will become members of NATO.” Another stint of non-alignment followed in 2010–2014, ending with the first Russian invasion, occupation of the part of Donbas, and annexation of Crimea. The new security strategy of 2020 renewed the NATO membership objective, but the Russian invasion of 2022 made membership impossible, despite the affirmation of the membership perspective by the NATO allies at the 2023 Vilnius Summit.

This history presents Ukraine with a bit of a dilemma: considering the fate of the Budapest Memorandum, what kind of bilateral guarantees may address its security predicament?

The Agreement on Security Co-Operation between the UK and Ukraine [provides a glimpse](#) of the current effort, as well as its limits. The agreement contains lofty phrases about “working towards a hundred-year partnership,” but its practical side is encapsulated in article four of the part on defense and military cooperation, where the UK pledges “to ensure Ukrainian Armed Forces and security forces are able to fully restore Ukraine’s territorial integrity [...] as well as to increase Ukraine’s resilience so that it is sufficient to deter and defend against future attacks and coercion.” (Part II, Art. 4)

The arrangement is, therefore, premised on the proven capability of the Ukrainian armed forces to defend their homeland and seeks to enhance its deterrence capability.

This sounds less comprehensive than the “unequivocal guarantee” [offered](#) by the UK and France to Poland in 1939 to “lend the Polish Government all support in their power.”

Yet, the historical context is vitally important here. Obviously, the “unequivocal” 1939 guarantee, even if it was hailed as a revolutionary departure from the British foreign policy of limited commitments since Versailles, could not save Poland. What is more, this commitment became a formal cause of Britain declaring a state of war with Germany. The repetition of a similar situation in the nuclear era is something that all nuclear-capable powers would want to avoid at any cost.

Consequently, the 2023 UK agreement with Ukraine is different in its substantive and temporal scope: it is premised on bolstering Ukraine’s current determination to resist and has a short-term security objective to ensure deterrence. Kyiv signed similar agreements also with France and Germany.

The document signed with France guarantees “global assistance” to help re-establish territorial

integrity, economic recovery, and reconstruction. It also offers “prevention, active dissuasion and all other measures” against “any new aggression” from Russia. Similarly, [the agreement](#) with Germany pledges “unwavering support” to Ukraine’s ability to defend itself, restore territorial integrity, secure freedom, and relaunch the economy. Germany and France both committed to providing long-term military support, training, and equipping Ukrainian troops. Importantly, neither pledged direct support to NATO membership: while an agreement with France pledges “support to Euro-Atlantic integration,” it specifies “interoperability” with NATO. The Agreement with Germany has no such provision.

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Armenia: Limits of Confidence

Armenia, until recently, has been a net consumer of “Gold Plus” security assurance from the other side – from Russia. Yerevan is a member of NATO’s Russia-led *doppelganger* – the [1992 agreement](#) of the Collective Security Treaty Organizations (CSTO), which bounds its members to treat aggression towards one as aggression towards all (Article 4). On top of that guarantee, Armenia has well-established bilateral military procurement treaties with Russia and, since 1995, has stationed the Russian 102nd Military Base in Gyumri.

Yet, what seemed like an ironclad commitment collapsed once Azerbaijan undertook in 2020 and 2023 successful operations to reclaim Nagorno-Karabakh – an Armenian-populated enclave that de-facto seceded from Azerbaijan in the 1990s with Yerevan’s backing. As Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was ongoing, Azerbaijan completed the takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh, the local administration [ceased to exist](#), most inhabitants fled, and senior Armenian political officials were arrested.

Even though Yerevan [triggered](#) the CSTO mutual defense mechanism, Russia clung to the fact that Karabakh was not Armenian sovereign territory and thus nullified the CSTO security guarantee. Armenia [boycotted](#) the CSTO meetings, even though it is [hesitating](#) about quitting it altogether, probably afraid to remove the only remaining obstacle to Azerbaijan’s further intervention. Yerevan finds itself still bound to Russia economically and has committed to [keep hosting the Gyumri base](#) till 2044 but draws little strategic benefit from the Russian military presence.

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Armenia offers a cautionary tale of a small country entering into a lock-step security partnership that collapses under the weight of circumstances beyond its control. The mitigating actions, such as [a military agreement with France](#) or a “strategic partnership” agreement [with Georgia](#), are of limited value despite the high-flying rhetoric and [disproportional irritation](#) from Baku. Pashinyan is at the mercy of the victors.

Azerbaijan: Kin State Alliance

An outlier in Russia's neighborhood, Azerbaijan has pursued the type of security umbrella that pre-dates modern military alliances – with a neighboring ethnic kin state. Since 1992, when Baku signed a military and security agreement with Ankara, the two states gradually established intertwined security and military structures, as well as a joint military industry. The cooperation expanded in the context of partnership on oil and gas projects, also involving Georgia since 2012.

In 2013, Baku and Ankara [penned the](#) Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Assistance, which contains the classical military assistance clause. Rather than engaging in consultations, Article 2 provides for engaging “all necessary measures [to be] taken within their capabilities, including the use of military means and capabilities.”

Even though Turkish armed forces did not play a direct military role in 2020, the Turkish military command is thought to have aided in the military planning of the Second Karabakh War, which broke out on September 27, 2020. And even though most of Azerbaijan's military arsenal came from Russia, certain critical capabilities, like UAVs and laser-guided bombs, [came from Türkiye](#). Similarly, in 2023, Türkiye [said](#) it had “no direct role” but provided advisory support and political backing to Baku's reclaiming of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Georgia's Precarious Inactivity

As we saw, Russia's aggression against Ukraine re-invigorated the quest for security in the neighborhood, but only a few countries have viable options.

Georgia's position is objectively unenviable. It does not have the strategic depth to effectively resist Russia militarily, especially since Russia enhanced its military facilities in Georgia's occupied

provinces after the 2008 incursion. But it is made worse by Tbilisi's policy. The government failed to capitalize on the awareness generated in the Western security community about Russia's aggressive aims since its first land grab in Ukraine in 2014 and build its defensive capability. There is no proof that Georgia has made any advances in securing effective anti-access area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, such as sophisticated air defense or electronic warfare tools.

The relationship with NATO continued on administrative auto-pilot but has [lost its dynamism](#), with the NATO SG Special Representative Javier Colomina expressing [dissatisfaction](#) with the pace of reforms. At the 2023 Vilnius Summit, there [were signs](#) that Georgia – the erstwhile leading state in partnership with NATO – was falling behind Ukraine on its path to membership. Georgia's former Prime Minister, Irakli Gharibashvili, publicly [doubted the possibility of joining NATO](#), saying, “We must think of ourselves first.” He also [seemed to blame](#) Ukraine's NATO aspiration for Russia's aggression. After Russia's new aggression against Ukraine, Tbilisi did not participate in the weapons substitution program, which saw several European states give their old Soviet air defense, armored, and artillery assets to Ukraine in exchange for newer Western-made models. Georgia got some [additional anti-tank Javelin missiles](#) from the U.S. but did not sign any large-scale weapons procurement deals that would have qualitatively improved its posture.

Two types of actions can be, however, discerned. One is the continuation of the trilateral partnership with Türkiye and Azerbaijan. Tbilisi participated in a [trilateral defense ministerial](#) in 2023 and is planning to host one in 2024. While undoubtedly valuable for securing oil and gas infrastructure against sabotage, this format offers Georgia no formal mutual security commitments or guarantees in case of larger-scale aggression.

Second, by far most dominant, has been Georgia's tactic of "restraint" towards Russia following its aggression on Ukraine. Georgia has joined sanctions in a limited way and welcomed Russians fleeing hardship and mobilization, providing them an outlet to Europe. The government cracked down on public displays of dissatisfaction with Russia-related policies, prevented the critics of Moscow from entering Georgia, and acted as one of the trading hubs for partially replacing imports of goods and services after the Western sanctions hit. Recently, Georgian security services [publicized a special operation](#), which they said prevented Ukraine from moving explosive devices to mainland Russia.

To put simply, Georgia's current strategy of "strategic patience" seems to be to put its head down and accommodate the Kremlin to the extent possible without attracting the ire of the West. Moscow [officially refers](#) to this as Tbilisi "forming its own sovereign policy" as opposed to being "the lapdog of the U.S."

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The [foreign policy egotism](#) is presented as pragmatic rationality in Tbilisi. It carries its costs and is also hitting its limits. The [transactional approach](#) towards the West and flirtations with Russian (and [Belorussian](#)) security services is undermining Georgia's credentials as a partner. Russia's creeping aggression and [militarization](#) of the occupied provinces are continuing unabated. So do detentions of Georgian citizens, regularly culminating in tragedies like the recent [shooting](#) of a villager by the occupation troops.

Entering the holding pattern and exercising caution while regional security is in flux and the attention of Georgia's Western partners is focused on Ukraine is rational. But in Georgia's case, the rationality would also command enhancing its own defensive capabilities and moving ahead towards the "Golden Standard" of security architecture – the NATO membership. That movement has been lacking momentum, as Shota Gvineria describes in this volume.

As immobilism accrues, it would be increasingly difficult to catch up on the lost time. Absent Russia's dramatic military and geopolitical defeat, without a sizeable military force, absent the resources or popular readiness to fight, Georgia will increasingly fade into Russia's military and security space – or become the ground of contention without an agency of its own ■