

# Small States, Big Stakes: Why Alliances Still Matter

**A**s the post-World War II order fractures and a multipolar world takes shape, the defining question is no longer whether or not power will shift, but how this will happen. Will the emerging global architecture be anchored in multilateralism and enduring alliances, or descend into spheres of influence where coercion, and not consent, sets the terms? The answer will depend not only upon great powers but also upon how effectively geopolitical players can forge resilient, value-driven partnerships and prove their resolve in decisive arenas where strategic lines are drawn. Georgia, a small Eastern European state with overwhelming public support for European integration, is a frontline test case of the EU's geopolitical credibility. The EU's response to democratic backsliding and Russia's interference in Georgia will demonstrate whether or not it is prepared to defend its political space and play a meaningful role in shaping the new global order.

## Fracturing Security Environment

As the post-World War II order fragments and a multipolar world takes shape, a critical question arises: will multilateralism shape this new era, or will it descend into competing spheres of influence where might makes right and partnerships are driven by transactional interests rather than enduring values and strategic alignments?

Much will depend upon the powers that emerge as the architects of this new world order. Given the current geopolitical uncertainty, marked by looming trade wars, intensifying rivalries between major actors like the United States and China, and the increasingly destructive behavior of revisionist Russia, the survival of multilateralism in any meaningful form hinges upon the European Union's ability to assert itself as a strong geopolitical actor, capable of operating across multiple fronts.



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The EU is uniquely positioned to play this role because of its economic strength and the type of power it can project—normative, inclusive, and stabilizing. Unlike actors that often operate through zero-sum frameworks, the EU has built its identity upon peaceful transformation, economic and legal integration, and a community of values. In a world at risk of fracturing along geopolitical and ideological lines, what will ultimately distinguish those capable of shaping global architecture is the ability to build versatile alliances grounded in enduring commitments and partnerships that are resilient, trust-based, and aligned in purpose.

From World War II through the Cold War, the strength and durability of alliances were shaped not only by military capabilities but by political will and the decisive roles of both major powers and smaller states. Resistance movements in occupied Europe helped bolster the legitimacy and moral authority of the Allied cause. In the post-war era, NATO's ability to uphold transatlantic security relied not solely upon American power but upon the integration of smaller democracies such as Denmark, Norway, and Iceland—countries whose inclusion proved essential. Their participation reinforced the common security and political cohesion and contributed to economic stability and institutional alignment. More recently, the accession of Sweden and Finland reaffirmed that even militarily relatively modest democracies can enhance the credibility, cohesion, and effectiveness of alliances.

The EU remains the most credible champion of a rules-based international order and has the potential to build alliances centered on legal norms, economic interdependence, and democratic governance as an alternative to predatory trade and coercive diplomacy. But to maintain that credibility, it must act decisively, reenergizing enlargement as its most powerful geopolitical tool and rethinking its partnership framework with the Global South to reflect a more adaptive and equitable model.

## Georgia at the Fault Line

Whether the EU can meet this challenge is not just a question of global relevance. It is a matter of existential importance for small countries in contested geopolitical environments. Despite its imperfections, the post-war system upheld the independence of smaller states by rejecting spheres of influence and affirming the primacy of legal norms. The dissolution of the Soviet Union reinforced this trajectory, fostering optimism in countries like Georgia that the EU and NATO membership could secure sovereignty, democratic consolidation, and prosperity.

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Today, that optimism has eroded. Georgia, a candidate for EU membership and long-standing NATO aspirant, is now mired in a democratic crisis and facing mounting pressure from an increasingly aggressive Russia. An oligarchic elite has captured the state. The current government, widely seen as lacking legitimacy, has grown overtly anti-Western. Its rapprochement with Moscow is no longer subtle. For many Georgians, the government [appears](#) more aligned with the Kremlin than the European future the public overwhelmingly supports. If a new iron curtain were to fall, Georgia would, in Moscow's calculus, belong on its side without too much resistance from Europe or the U.S..

In today's geopolitical climate, integration into the EU and NATO is no longer a long-term aspiration rooted in shared values, institutional commitments, and the security guarantees those alliances offer. Still, it is a matter of the survival of Georgia's sovereignty.

## A Test of EU Resolve

This moment should matter to the EU. In a multipolar world, treating countries like Georgia as peripheral is not just shortsighted, it is a strategic miscalculation. For Europe to emerge as a true geopolitical center of gravity, it must build alliances rooted in shared values and trust, adaptability, and strategic coherence. This is not about lofty ambition—it is about stern necessity at a time when the transatlantic alliance can no longer be taken for granted.

A faster, more determined pace of enlargement would signal that Europe is ready to act. The EU's indecisiveness and continued overreliance on U.S. leadership have weakened its geopolitical standing. The drawn-out accession process, particularly in the Western Balkans, has cast doubt on the Union's commitment to enlargement. The path Ukraine takes will further shape perceptions of the EU's resolve. But it is Georgia that now presents a unique and urgent test.

Here is a candidate country where public support for EU membership [remains](#) overwhelming. And yet, the process is being deliberately undermined by an entrenched oligarchic elite with [clear ties](#) to Moscow. This is not accidental. It is a key piece of Russia's strategy: to derail Georgia's Euro-Atlantic trajectory through indirect control. How the EU responds—when governance in a pro-European country is being captured by actors hostile to the European project—will reveal whether Europe can defend its own strategic space.

The timing is critical. Just as the 1990s opened a fleeting window for post-Soviet states to join Western institutions—a window seized through the enlargements of the early 2000s—today presents another such opportunity. That moment, decades ago, did not just stabilize Europe's eastern periphery; it made the Union stronger: expanding the single market, boosting resilience, and enhanc-

ing competitiveness. Despite those gains, today's EU appears hesitant. In Georgia, where civic mobilization continues and popular backing for the EU remains unwavering, Europe risks missing yet another strategic opportunity. To dismiss Georgia as peripheral—rather than seeing it as a frontline in the struggle over Europe's future—would be a grave error.

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Georgia is not only a partner in values—it is a geostrategic asset. Situated at the crossroads of East and West, Georgia plays a critical role in Europe's energy diversification and connectivity agenda. The Middle Corridor, linking Central Asia to European markets, cannot be fully realized without Georgia's cooperation and alignment. Georgia becomes indispensable as the EU races to secure energy alternatives and build resilient supply chains.

A democratic, stable Georgia is also crucial to broader regional stability, particularly between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Moreover, it is a gateway for deeper engagement with Central Asia. Supporting Georgia, then, is not merely about defending democracy—it is about investing in long-term regional security and European resilience.

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The EU has tools and must be willing to use them. Targeted sanctions—especially personal ones against those responsible for democratic erosion—



are on the table and have already been called for by the European Parliament. Diplomatic pressure for free and fair elections must be sustained. Financial and technical support for independent media and civil society must be ramped up. Most importantly, the EU must clearly distinguish between Georgia's state institutions, which are currently compromised, and its overwhelmingly pro-European population. The democratic trajectory in Georgia is not self-correcting. If it collapses, it will signal that authoritarian encroachment is a viable and effective tool for undermining European security and cohesion.

Geopolitical contests are not won with long-winded declarations or technocratic caution. They are won through political will. From Latin America to Southeast Asia and across Africa, governments are watching closely—not just to see whether the EU stands by its partners but whether or not it can defend its long-term interests. If Europe fails to uphold its influence in a candidate country like Georgia, where support for the EU is not just rhetorical, it sends a damaging message: that authoritarian actors are more decisive, more reliable.

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Georgia is more than a country in need. It is a mirror reflecting Europe's own uncertainties. The choices Brussels makes now will show whether or not the EU can lead in shaping a global order defined not by coercion but by resilient alliances and strategic resolve. As the international system shifts, the EU must decide: will it act with confidence and clarity, or cede the initiative to more assertive powers?

The determination of Georgia's citizens—especially its youth—to defend their democracy and European future is a vivid reminder of what is at stake. In their courage lies a challenge—and an invitation. The question is whether or not Europe is ready to meet it ■