The False Promise of Georgia's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy

When the Ministry of Education abruptly announced its plan to introduce "Chinese as a second language" in Georgia's secondary schools, the social media furor among opposition-minded Georgians ensued. The Ministry later clarified that it only meant to approve the language programs due to "growing demand" for the language but the bitter aftertaste remained. And for a good reason.

The Georgian Dream has been actively cultivating ties with Beijing. In 2023, then Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili - himself a former employee of a Chinese company - signed a declaration of Strategic Partnership. On 18 April 2025, at the 9th meeting of the Sino-Georgian Trade and Economic Cooperation Commission, the sides touted the 17% trade growth, making China Georgia's fourth-largest trading partner. Cozying up to China while the relations with the U.S. and the EU are strained to the breaking point gets many Georgians worried. Where is the country heading? Once a poster child for reforms and a success story of Western integration, Georgia now appears increasingly engaged with non-Western (not to say anti-Western) countries. Tbilisi's once gung-ho official posture on Euro-Atlantic integration has shifted, as has the political language. It is now touting the benefits of "sovereignty." Domestically, this shift has been accompanied by ever-growing illiberal rhetoric as the authorities ramped up pressure on media, civil society organizations, and political opposition.

So, what lies behind the country's pivot to China? For government-aligned experts and commentators, the answer is straightforward: it is all part of a carefully crafted strategy to survive in a dif-

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GEORGIAN DREAM
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ficult geopolitical setting as well as a way to reduce threats from Russia. The argument goes that since Europe is in decline while the U.S. is increasingly isolationist, Georgia needs a "multi-vector" foreign policy—a supposedly balanced approach aimed at diversifying the country's partnerships in a world dominated by power politics.

But much like the uncertainty surrounding Georgia's political direction, these explanations raise more questions than they answer. What accounts for the timing of this sudden eastward reorientation? And why, of all potential partners, China? It also raises a broader question: is the concept of a "multi-vector" foreign policy relevant to Georgia's geopolitical realities, or even feasible? Or is it merely a rhetorical tool without real substance to it?

Eyes Eastward: A Brief History of Sino-Georgian Relations

While the roots of China-Georgia relations can be traced back centuries, from ancient trade routes to intermittent cultural exchanges, the modern iteration of their relationship is relatively fresh. Diplomatic ties were established in 1992 but the following two decades saw little substantive action. Although 3rd President Mikheil Saakashvili made some gestures toward Beijing, with China responding in the form of modest economic investments, Chinese interest in Georgia—and the broader region—remained limited, trailing much behind Tbilisi's express enthusiasm. Still, the two sides made sure to cross off the basics from their agendas: Tbilisi secured Beijing's support for Georgia's territorial integrity while in return, Tbilisi backed Beijing's One China policy.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) emerged as a game-changer in this equation, generating greater Chinese interest in the Black Sea–Caspian Sea transit corridor in the mid-2010s. Georgia quickly positioned itself as one of the early and eager supporters of the initiative, viewing it as an opportunity to boost connectivity, attract investment, and enhance its role as a vital transit hub between Europe and Asia. Importantly, this also aligned with Georgia's long-standing rhetorical framing of itself as a bridge between East and West—a narrative used to signal not a shift away from the West but rather to reinforce Georgia's crucial relevance to trade links.

Interestingly, when the Georgian Dream assumed power, it signaled initial hostility to China. Fresh out of election victory in 2013, the ruling party's patron and newly minted Prime Minister, Bidzina Ivanishvili, was scaremongering about "126 thousand Chinese" that the previous administration allegedly agreed to settle in Tbilisi (that claim was later proven wrong). Similarly, Justice Minister Tea Tsulukiani, in 2015, was crediting herself for limiting tourism from China which she alleged helped secure visa-free travel with the EU (also fact-checked as incorrect).

But by 2017, these early qualms were already gone: Tbilisi and Beijing penned the free trade agreement. Still, the real momentum emerged only after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the Georgian Dream souring with the West. In the following months, Tbilisi began quickly dispatching high-level delegations to Beijing, signaling a clear desire for deeper, more active engagement. China reciprocated cautiously at first but after some initial reluctance, the two sides sealed the strategic partnership in July 2023. There is talk that a Chinese company may take over a strategic port project in Anaklia - much to U.S. chagrin. Less than a year later, they also signed an agreement on visa-free travel. Does this mean Georgia is embracing a fully-fledged "multi-vector" foreign policy?

On Multi-Vector Foreign Policy

Although there is no universally accepted definition of "multi-vector" foreign policy, the term has been part of the diplomatic parlance since the early 1990s, thanks to President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, who first introduced the concept. Broadly understood, it refers to a pattern in which small states engage simultaneously, although not equally, with multiple external powers, seeking to extract political and economic benefits from them while avoiding firm alignment with any single actor. Rhetorically, it is framed as a pragmatic response to geopolitical difficulties: a strategy for preserving sovereignty and advancing national interests without taking explicit sides. In this sense, it draws clear parallels to the Cold War-era policy of non-alignment - think Tito's Yugoslavia - and is often viewed as its post-Soviet successor in states like Kazakhstan and Belarus (until Russia consolidated its hold there following the failed 2021 protests). At different times, the foreign policies of Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan have also been described as multi-vectoral. In Georgia, this idea also has a history: 2nd President Eduard Shevardnadze tried to pursue the balancing act between Russia and the West, although more out of the harsh realities of a nearly-failed state, rather than a wanton strategy.

Noble as it may sound, portraying these cases as rational actions of states engaged in a sophisticated balancing act - serving the *raison d'état* - is highly misleading. Behind the maneuvering lies a far more self-serving agenda. In many cases, the primary goal is the consolidation of domestic power in the context of great-power or regional competition: maintaining control, entrenching clientelist networks, and eliminating threats to the ruling elite by courting investment, sourcing arms, enhancing security cooperation, and soliciting political protection.

Importantly, these days, the "multi-vector" policy is often viewed gracefully from Moscow, approved among other signs of "sovereign independence," emancipation from the "vortex of liberal democracy," as Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov put it. It also serves as an affirmation of the Kremlin's "multipolar" worldview, an implicit recognition of its primacy in the "near abroad" region. Curiously, the quest for "sovereignty" (from the U.S. and then also from the USSR) was one of the key words of Mao's domestic policy which he proceeded to actively deploy as a foreign policy instrument in seeking recognition and alliances with former Western colonies worldwide.

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Why Is Georgia's Multi-Vector Policy Aimless?

Tbilisi's declared hopes vis-à-vis China rest on two key justifications. First, Georgian Dream pundits argue that China's economic power will serve as a catalyst for Georgia's economic development, bringing necessary investments, growth, and prosperity. Second, government-affiliated experts suggest that deeper Chinese involvement in Georgia will eventually enhance the country's security, making Beijing a potential counterbalance to both the (imaginary) threats to Georgian identity from

the EU and the U.S. and the real Russian security threat. Implicit in this assumption is the belief that China would be both willing and able to challenge foreign (including Russian) influence in the region and in this line of argumentation, China is not only a source of economic opportunity but also a stabilizing factor in a volatile geopolitical environment.

Behind their justifications, however, lies an uncomfortable reality: China is not that much into Georgia or the region.

It is true that post-COVID and after Russia's new invasion of Ukraine began, China developed a strategic interest in diversifying its trade routes towards the EU across the Eurasian continent. Especially after Houthi attacks endangered sea links, writes *The Economist*, China decided to think strategically about the Middle Corridor (MC) transportation route, a portion of which (Kazakhstan-Azerbaijan-Black Sea) goes through Georgia. Yet, while the Middle Corridor is shorter, it takes longer and would require substantial investments to upgrade infrastructure. The model developed by the World Bank study says MC trade volumes may triple by 2030 but this "will remain mostly a regional corridor." And while the China-Europe trade accounts for the biggest increase of corridor use in this model, it would still carry around 1% of EU-China trade. Thus, the MC is not so strategic for Beijing and its value hinges primarily on regional actors, especially Kazakhstan, trading with each other while avoiding Russia. It goes without saying that such a scenario may meet political resistance from the Kremlin and be more expensive. Thus, Tbilisi's assumed importance to Beijing's agenda appears more aspirational than real.

No less notable is the nature of the existing Chinese economic engagement in Georgia. As is typical for China in developing countries, its involvement in Georgia has been largely extractive, centered on implementing large-scale road infrastructure projects which are often funded by loans taken by the Georgian government (i.e., to be paid back by Georgian taxpayers) and often from China itself.

This pattern may hide the highest private interest the Georgian Dream government has in courting China. The infrastructure projects are notoriously opaque and the funds are fungible. CEFC China - the company that employed Gharibashvili - has been notorious for kickbacks to foreign leaders and its once stellar founder was arrested by the FBI in 2017 for bribing officials in Chad and Uganda, falling rapidly in disgrace in Beijing, too.

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Starting last November, citizens in Serbia have been protesting for months after the railway canopy collapsed in the provincial city of Novi Sad, killing 14 people. The station was a part of the multi-billion-dollar railway infrastructure project implemented by the Chinese company under the Belt and Road Initiative, which ran massive overruns, and the financial documentation for which remains classified. The Serbian example shows how Chinese investment can be both lucrative and risky. President Aleksandar Vučić, otherwise confidently exerting increasingly authoritarian control over Serbia by - among other things - pursuing a "multi-vector" policy, has already sacrificed his Prime Minister and is facing perhaps the first serious challenge to his rule.

However, the risks are not only felt in the capitals

that court and receive China's largesse. According to a researcher of China's projects in Africa, after multiple countries fell into debt traps and failed to reimburse Beijing, "the key word for both the Chinese government and private entrepreneurs became 'risk.'" The Chinese have also become increasingly concerned about the political backlash in countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, and Guinea-Conakry. In Montenegro, the Bar-Boljare motorway project, financed by China, put the government under heavy political pressure and triggered an acute debt crisis. Only by EU intervention and borrowing heavily did Podgorica manage to avoid its key port being taken as collateral. True, few in the elite benefited hugely from these Chinese loans. Still, their results were often disastrous for the countries and their political effects were sometimes contrary to Beijing's interests which now treads more carefully.

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Talks about China as a potential security guarantor are even more inflated. There is little in China's behavior to suggest that it would be willing to counter Russia's influence in the region, let alone to act as a safeguard for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Beijing says its cooperation with Moscow is "back-to-back, shoulder-to-shoulder." Even in regions where Chinese stakes have been traditionally higher, such as Central Asia, Beijing has shown a clear preference for operating only within the economic domain, carefully avoiding deeper engagement in the politically sensitive areas. It follows from there that expecting China to serve as a stabilizing force against Russian pressure not only overstates Beijing's intentions in Georgia but also misreads its broader geopolitical positioning. Georgia sits on the periphery of China's strategic interests—physically distant, relatively small, and economically feeble. Yes, Beijing has engaged with Serbia or Hungary which are both closely integrated with the EU (one as a candidate, the other as a member) and which can offer more effective access to the EU markets. Georgia - especially as it recklessly burns bridges with Brussels - lacks the same appeal.

Without a Rudder

The Georgian Dream likes to say that it can reassert its "sovereignty" from the EU (i.e., freedom to ignore its values) by effecting the pivot towards Asia with a particular accent on China. This has worked for Serbia and Hungary, but in less stormy times, and even then, only partially.

In the current, rapidly polarizing and hardening international context, the dream of a "non-aligned" Georgia is illusory. Nothing about Georgia makes it indispensable to a major player like China. Indeed, Beijing's economic interest in Serbia, Montenegro, and Hungary was to better access Europe and Georgia's value in its eyes would have increased by getting closer to Brussels, not running away from it.

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By burning its bridges with Europe and the United States, the Georgian Dream will likely reduce, rather than boost, Georgia's space for sovereign maneuver. As official Tbilisi is weakened internationally, beset by internal political crisis and unstable in terms of security and economy, Georgia's foreign policy agency is likely to be reduced and its choices subsumed to the whims of regional (Russia, Türkiye) and sub-regional (Azerbaijan) powers.

There can be no meaningful multi-vector foreign policy for Georgia in general and especially while the Georgian Dream, in want of legitimacy, cannot firmly hold the rudder. Any flirting with such an approach risks pushing the country closer to the Russian Federation by default or by design.

The EU must take note. Talking up economic cooperation projects, such as the Black Sea power cable sponsored by Hungary and Azerbaijan, created an impression in Tbilisi that values take a back seat when economic interests are concerned. And while the harsh realities may justify such attitude, Brussels must make clear where it draws the geographic redline: those who want to get into (or stay in) the EU - even if by 2030 - cannot do so on promises of cheap energy or by indebting themselves in China and cracking down on dissent ■