Demise of a Foreign Policy Paradigm

Rethinking Georgia's Role and Function

There is a classic passage in the landmark Georgian novel, *Data Tutashkhia*, written during Soviet times, which captures a timeless truth: *a nation cannot sustain a state without a clear international role or historic mission*. Georgia once embodied such a function—as the eastern stronghold of Christianity, a buffer against northern tribes, and a vital East-West trade route. This mission shaped both the state and its people: war, sacrifice, and loyalty to the state became the moral framework of national life.

When these functions disappeared, Byzantium collapsed, Russia assumed leadership of Orthodoxy, and global trade shifted to the seas—Georgia lost its purpose and (in)voluntarily became absorbed by Russia. Without a mission, the state weakened, morality eroded, and the people turned from nation-building to mere survival. The result was disunity, fatigue, and decline, ultimately culminating in the loss of statehood.

This historical reflection poignantly highlights the enduring challenge of Georgian statehood and resonates with its foreign policy vision after the restoration of independence. The idea of a nation's international function remains central—a foundational question for Georgia's modern foreign policy community as it seeks once again to define its role in the world.

Since achieving independence in 1991, Georgia has consistently worked to transform its geographic vulnerabilities into strategic strengths. Positioned at the intersection of Europe and Asia, the nation adopted the transport corridor paradigm—an approach that placed Georgia as a central link in Eurasian connectivity. Over time, this paradigm not only shaped the country's foreign policy but also became a defining element of its international identity.

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railways, highways, and ports. This was more than an economic project—it was statecraft and part of an ideology. Each new corridor bypassing Russia was a political act aimed at safeguarding Georgia's sovereignty and integrating it into Western markets. The expansion of these routes reduced reliance on Moscow, drew in Western companies and governments, and offered security rooted not in hard power but in interdependence and shared interest.

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For over a decade, this paradigm had been effective. During the era of Pax Americana, Georgia's role as a corridor state fit neatly into the global order. The Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA), Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline (BTC), the South Caucasian Gas Pipeline (SCP), the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP), the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars Railway (BTK), East-West highways, port projects—each reinforced Georgia's image as an indispensable connector, a place where Eurasian energy and trade converged. The Middle Corridor narrative made Georgia central to discussions of China-Europe connectivity, and even the Digital Silk Road passed through Tbilisi. Georgia even tried to reinvent itself as a logistical hub for East-West trade – cutting red tape and making regulatory changes which attracted investors interested in regional connectivity.

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the end of innocence. It revealed that connectivity and pipelines could not shield Georgia from military aggression and it exposed the fragility of a paradigm built entirely on transit, trade, and connectivity. The subsequent rise of revisionist powers—Russia, China, Iran, Türkiye—accelerated this shift. Each began carving out its own geopolitical projects, contesting the order that had once anchored Georgia.

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Recent wars have driven the point home. Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Middle East—all have redrawn maps and rewritten assumptions. The South Caucasus, once frozen in stalemate, has been jolted into motion. Armenia's dramatic pivot away from Russia, Azerbaijan's consolidation of military and diplomatic victories and strained relations with Moscow, Türkiye's growing assertiveness, Europe's long-standing interest in diversifying energy supply, and the United States' sudden re-entry into the region have created the conditions for new corridors that bypass Georgia altogether.

At the center of this upheaval is the proposed link (a Zangezur, or a Syunik corridor, or route) between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan through Armenia—an idea once unthinkable, now edging closer to reality. Backed by Washington and Ankara, and welcomed by a Yerevan desperate to break free from Moscow's grip, this route would establish a direct chain from the Caspian to the Mediterranean, cutting Georgia out of the picture. For three decades, Tbilisi had enjoyed the privilege of indispensability. That privilege is now in question.

A "Eurasian Nokia" – Connecting People

Georgia's corridor paradigm has always been about far more than steel and concrete. TRACECA, launched at the Brussels ministerial in 1993, was an explicitly Europe-backed effort to pull the South Caucasus—Georgia included—into a rules-based connectivity space linking the Black Sea, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The early pipelines made that vision tangible: the Baku–Supsa pipeline, inaugurated in 1999, created a westward oil outlet via Georgia's Black Sea coast, followed by the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline (2006) and the South Caucasus Gas Pipeline, which together hard-wired Georgia into East-West energy flows that bypass Russia. Washington codified the political logic behind those choices in the 2009 U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Charter, committing to "develop a new Southern Corridor to help Georgia and the rest of Europe diversify their supplies of natural gas."

Crucially, this corridor idea sits inside Georgia's own national doctrine. The National Security Concept lists "strengthening the transit role of Georgia" as a core national interest and makes "diversification of energy sources and transportation routes" an explicit energy-security priority. When the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway opened, Tbilisi framed it in exactly those terms—"great importance for the development of the transit function" for Georgia, underscoring that rail was part of statecraft, not just freight. And the intended maritime keystone of the model—the deep-sea port at Anaklia is (or rather was) supposed to host larger vessels and lock the Black Sea into global shipping rotations.

In 2019, the EU further embedded Georgia's connectivity role by extending the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) to the Eastern Partnership and issuing an Indicative Investment

Action Plan that identifies priority cross-border projects; for Georgia alone, that list includes 18 projects worth roughly EUR 3.4 billion across roads, rail, and ports. Brussels has kept adding money and technical help—most recently via the Economic & Investment Plan and targeted upgrades on Georgia's East–West Highway—to speed up compliance with EU standards and cut travel times on the Black Sea corridor. However, this interest from Brussels all but disappeared once the authoritarian rise in Georgia occurred, starting in 2022.

For many years, this strategy thrived because Georgia faced no real competition. It was the dependable hinge in a volatile neighborhood—the connector through which goods, energy, and ideas flowed. But just as Nokia once dominated global telecommunications only to fade when competitors caught up, Georgia now risks the same fate. Its brand as the indispensable corridor will only endure if it adapts and reinvents itself as new routes emerge and larger players enter the game.

An Alternative to the Alternative

The Zangezur Corridor, traversing Armenia's Syunik province, has become the lightning rod of the new connectivity discussions in the South Caucasus. Born from the 2020 war's ceasefire and fueled by the shifting alliances of the past five years, it has drawn in every major actor in the region, each attaching its own narrative and ambitions.

For Azerbaijan, it is more than a road: it is the embodiment of victory, sealing the gains of war by giving Baku direct access to Nakhchivan without reliance on Iran. It cements Azerbaijan's status as a transit hub linking the Caspian to Türkiye and beyond while deepening its strategic partnership with Ankara. Moreover, when the route is opened, Azerbaijan will also control the South-North trade from Iran to Russia, provided that sanctions on these two states are lifted and their participation in strategic connectivity projects is feasible.

For Türkiye, the corridor is a bridge to the Turkic world—a material realization of pan-Turkic ambition. It would allow Ankara to extend its influence further eastward, binding Central Asia more closely to Türkiye through Azerbaijan. Economically, it unlocks new routes; politically, it confirms Türkiye as the indispensable power of the South Caucasus.

For Armenia, the picture is more complex. Yerevan's Crossroads of Peace initiative reframed connectivity not as defeat but as an opportunity, with a heavy emphasis on opening all kinds of transit and trade routes, even beyond Syunik. By reopening links with Türkiye and Azerbaijan and strengthening existing ones with Iran and Georgia, Armenia hopes to shed its isolation and diminish its dependence on Russia. It is a gamble, although turning the corridor from a symbol of subjugation into an instrument of national revival is not an easy task and is prone to making potent enemies, mainly in Moscow.

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For the United States, a rebranded Zangezur corridor into a trade route – TRIPP (the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity) adds a significant layer. With American companies leasing the Armenian stretch for a century, Washington would gain both economic presence and strategic leverage, controlling a trade artery in the backyard of Iran, Russia, and China. What began as an abstract geopolitical idea now carries the promise of

tangible U.S. power projection. As long as President Trump and, by extension, Washington maintain interest in this project, the success chance of this route and peace in the region will be high.

For Iran, the project is an existential problem; however, Tehran's influence in the current circumstances is quite limited. Its role as Azerbaijan's bridge to Nakhchivan would evaporate, stripping Tehran of significant leverage over a neighbor that has not been easy in the last decade. Worse, the corridor would anchor a Turkish-Azerbaijani-Western axis along its northern border, raising fears of encirclement and weakening its influence in the Caucasus.

For Russia, the implications are almost entirely negative. The corridor sidelines Moscow as a peace guarantor, weakens its grip on Armenia, removes Russian physical presence from Armenian borders, and deepens Türkiye's role at Russia's expense. In a region once defined by Moscow's dominance, Russia risks becoming a spectator, watching as others redraw the map without it.

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In this swirl of shifting interests, one fact stands out: every actor has a vision for the corridor. Every actor sees a gain. Every actor is shaping the future. And Georgia—once the indispensable link—is nowhere to be found.

Back to the Drawing Board?

Historically, Georgia thrived when it had a function. As a crossroads on the Silk Road, it mattered because it connected worlds. As a corridor in the 1990s and 2000s, it mattered because it connected energy and trade to the West. But if the Zangezur/TRIPP route materializes, Georgia risks being stripped of that function. Its hard-earned status as an alternative corridor would be undermined; its leverage as the indispensable gateway eroded.

The danger is not just lost revenues or stalled infrastructure. It is strategic irrelevance. Without a role, Georgia risks once again becoming a nation of survival rather than a nation with a mission. And as it is elegantly noted in *Data Tutashkhia*, once Georgia loses mission, it also loses sovereignty, independence, and statehood.

The tragedy is that this increased attention to regional connectivity in the South Caucasus comes at a time when Georgia's leadership has turned away from its Western partners, alienating allies and drifting into Moscow's shadow. Under Bidzina Ivanishvili, the state is losing not just friends but purpose. If Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye succeed in building a new regional order, Georgia may wake up to find itself excluded from the future of the region it once anchored.

The lesson from *Data Tutashkhia* remains: *a nation without a role cannot sustain a state*. For Georgia, the choice is simple. Either it reclaims a mission—anchored in Euro-Atlantic integration and renewed Western partnerships—or it resigns itself to decline, watching others write the story of Eurasian connectivity while it slips into an irrelevant cul-de-sac ■