

## Georgia-NATO Relations In Thrall To Previous Miscalculations

03.09.2015, Radio Free Europe (US) *Liz Fuller*

<http://www.rferl.org/content/georgia-nato-relations-thrall-past-miscalculations/27224738.html>

**N**ATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg traveled to Tbilisi last week for the formal opening of a NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Center intended to fulfill two mutually exclusive objectives.

The first was to reassure the Georgian leadership that the alliance remains committed to its previous pledges to support Georgia in its aspirations to become a NATO member; the second was to avoid exacerbating even further the tensions between Russia and the West resulting from Moscow's 2014 annexation of Crimea and ongoing military support for the separatist movement in eastern Ukraine.

Predictably, neither objective was achieved. Georgian politicians, in the first instance parliament speaker [Davit Usupashvili](#) and his wife, Defense Minister [Tinatin Khidasheli](#), continue to argue that what Georgia needs is NATO membership, not palliatives.

Russia for its part [promptly denounced](#) the opening of the new facility as "the continuation of the alliance's provocative policy aimed at expanding its geopolitical influence" and "a serious destabilizing factor for security in the region."

Those reactions both reflect and reinforce the perception each side has of the other.

Ever since the collapse of the U.S.S.R. in late 1991, which Russian President Vladimir Putin has characterized as the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century," Georgia has been vulnerable to political, military, and economic pressure and blackmail from its large northern

neighbor, including energy cutoffs in midwinter and a ban in 2006 on imports of Georgian wine and mineral water.

And for most of that time, successive Georgian leaders have perceived NATO membership as the most, if not the only, effective counterweight to such pressure, given the wording of Article 5 of NATO's [founding charter](#), which defines an armed attack on any one of its members as an attack on all of them.

Then-President Eduard Shevardnadze was the first Georgian leader to announce his intention, in an interview in October 1999 with the Financial Times, of "knocking vigorously on NATO's door." His successor, Mikheil Saakashvili, elevated NATO membership to the cornerstone of Georgian foreign policy, thereby exacerbating tensions with Russia to the point that former National Security Council Chairman Tedo Japaridze [wrote](#) in early 2008 that "Georgian-Russian relations are stuck...below freezing point.... The discourse in the media between the two countries is full of mutual hatred, while mutual interests are disregarded."

Saakashvili reversed Shevardnadze's policy of downsizing the armed forces in order to enhance combat effectiveness and [ramped up](#) defense spending to almost 10 percent of GDP in 2007, while neglecting the need for the parallel structural, economic, and judicial reform that NATO requires from candidate countries. As Georgian analyst Shalva Pichkhadze [observed](#) in October 2007, the government was apparently "betting on NATO's political motives for accepting Georgia as a member, rather than on having a pristine reform record."

That bet, if such it was, might [have paid off](#) had Saakashvili not deployed police armed with water cannons in early November 2007 to disperse protesters gathered outside the parliament building in Tbilisi.

In light of the requirement that key NATO decisions require a consensus, there is little point in speculating whether, if it had not been for Saakashvili's recourse to violence against peaceful demonstrators, Georgia would have been offered a Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008. Instead, the summit [affirmed](#) that "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO. Both nations have made valuable contributions to Alliance operations.... MAP is the next step for Ukraine and Georgia on their

direct way to membership. Today we make clear that we support these countries' applications for MAP."

Four months later, however, in early August 2008, Saakashvili dealt a further serious blow to his country's chances of joining NATO, when in response to systematic military provocations from Moscow, he launched what a subsequent [EU-sponsored investigation](#) termed "a sustained Georgian artillery attack" on the town of Tskhinvali with the intention of restoring control over Georgia's breakaway self-proclaimed Republic of South Ossetia.

Moscow responded with disproportionate force, not just by dispatching tanks to defend the South Ossetian capital and subjecting the town of Gori to air and artillery bombardment; Russian troops also pushed south into the Georgian heartland, occupying Gori, the Black Sea port of Poti, and the military base at Senaki, which the Georgian military reportedly abandoned without firing a shot.

In fact, the Georgian armed forces proved anything but battle-ready. According to an International Crisis Group (ICG) report, "the [Georgian] armed forces and military infrastructure sustained heavy damage during the Russian invasion, revealing flaws in planning, supply, coordination, air defense, and combat communications systems which contributed to quick demoralization of the troops." Several dozen rank-and-file servicemen reportedly deserted, as did a handful of senior officers. Military infrastructure, including the military airfield at Marneuli in southern Georgia that Turkey had modernized in line with NATO standards, was badly damaged; up to one-quarter of Georgia's 240 main battle tanks were destroyed.

Then-Defense Minister Davit Kezerashvili estimated the total material damage at \$250 million. The late Ronald Asmus, then-executive director of the Brussels-based Transatlantic Center, [commented](#) that "following this war, it will be years before Georgia again reaches NATO's current criteria for new members."

Since 2008, NATO has nonetheless doggedly sought new ways to address Georgia's fears of Russia and enhance its military capabilities while not incurring Moscow's wrath by formally offering Georgia a MAP. Within weeks of the August conflict, a NATO-Georgia Commission was established with the [stated aim](#) of "deepen[ing] political dialogue and cooperation" and "underpin[ing] Georgia's efforts to take forward its political, economic, and defense-related

reforms pertaining to its Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO, with a focus on key democratic and institutional goals."

A NATO liaison office was [opened](#) in Georgia in October 2010.

The final [declarations](#) adopted at NATO's Lisbon summit in 2010 and the Chicago summit two years later reaffirmed the commitment made in Bucharest that "Georgia will become a NATO member," without offering any indication of the time frame. The Chicago [declaration](#) noted that "Georgia's progress since the Bucharest Summit to meet its Euro-Atlantic aspirations through its reforms, implementation of its Annual National Program, and active political engagement with the Alliance in the NATO-Georgia Commission."

In May 2014, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly called in a [nonbinding resolution](#) for Georgia to be offered a MAP at the NATO summit in Wales in September. But again, Georgia's aspirations fell foul of the consensus requirement: According to an unidentified NATO diplomat [quoted by Reuters](#) in June 2014, at that point the alliance was split 50-50 over admitting Georgia.

Instead, the Newport summit announced the decision to establish the Joint Training and Assessment Center as part of what the summit final [communiqué](#) described as "a substantial package for Georgia that includes defense capacity building, training, exercises, strengthened liaison, and enhanced interoperability opportunities. These measures aim to strengthen Georgia's defense and interoperability capabilities with the Alliance, which will help Georgia advance in its preparations towards membership in the Alliance."

Impatient with the alliance's failure to offer a MAP, Usupashvili argued at a meeting of NATO's Parliamentary Assembly in May that "during the [NATO] Warsaw summit [in 2016] we expect a very clear decision about giving Georgia a MAP, or making it clear that Georgia does not need a MAP any more and that membership is not preconditioned on a MAP." He said Georgia was as [ready for NATO membership today](#) as some unspecified current members were at the time they were invited to join the alliance.

Meanwhile, Russia continues to construe every new move toward expanding and strengthening cooperation between Georgia and NATO as a bid to extend NATO's influence even further into former Soviet space and/or as posing an existential threat to South Ossetia

and Abkhazia, both of which Russia formally recognized as independent states in the wake of the August 2008 war. Commenting on the opening of the Joint Training and Evaluation Center, one retired Russian general [told](#) the Daily Telegraph that "if Georgia joined NATO tomorrow, then the next day they would attack Abkhazia."

Such rhetoric fails to differentiate between Saakashvili's maximalist policy that culminated in the severing of diplomatic relations with Russia in September 2008 and the arguably more nuanced and pragmatic approach adopted by the Georgian Dream coalition that defeated Saakashvili's United National Movement in the October 2012 parliamentary elections. The new government embarked on bilateral talks with Russia, primarily on economic issues; in 2014, it joined only [one of the 15 sanctions](#) the European Union imposed on Russia in retaliation for its annexation of Crimea.

In short, the Georgian government remains in thrall to what many regard as mistakes committed by its predecessor, and to the increasing reluctance of both U.S. and European politicians to risk further antagonizing Russia by formally offering Georgia a MAP. [As Jos Boonstra, head of the Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia program at the European think tank FRIDE, commented, "from a technical point of view there might be little reason to withhold a MAP now, especially in the wake of continued public support for NATO membership. Political and strategic realities, however, show a different picture."](#)