

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Georgia's Dangerous Slide Toward NATO

By: Doug Bandow – April 26, 2013

Power shifted in Tbilisi, Georgia, when Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream party triumphed at the polls. Yet Prime Minister Ivanishvili, though hostile to Western-favorite President Mikheil Saakashvili, has continued the latter's quest to win a NATO security guarantee against Russia. Washington should firmly spike what would be a Georgian Nightmare.

Georgia suffered through a tumultuous birth when it split from the Soviet Union two decades ago. Saakashvili ousted Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Soviet foreign minister, in the 2003 "Rose Revolution." The Western-educated Saakashvili looked to the United States and Europe for support. But he found himself alone when he started and lost a war with Russia in 2008.

Even before that conflict, Tbilisi courted the United States and NATO. Shortly after achieving independence, Georgia contributed troops to the NATO mission in Kosovo, joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (later renamed the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council), and joined the Partnership for Peace program. But that was just the start. Observed NATO: "Relations between NATO and Georgia have deepened significantly over the years since dialogue and cooperation was first launched in the early 1990s."

The Saakashvili government inaugurated an Individual Partnership Action Plan with NATO and joined the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. In 2006 Tbilisi gained an Intensified Dialogue on membership and at the April 2008 NATO Summit alliance leaders agreed that Georgia would eventually become a member.

Moreover, Saakashvili emphasized his personal ties to America, hired an adviser to Sen. John McCain as a lobbyist, and sent troops to fight in Iraq. President George W. Bush showered Tbilisi with praise and money and staged a state visit to Georgia. The Bush administration also strongly backed Tbilisi for membership in what nominally remained the *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*.

However, leading European members of the alliance were less disposed to confront nuclear-armed Russia over a border dispute considered vital by the latter but irrelevant to Europe. The 2008 conflict vindicated their stance. Nevertheless, the Bush administration continued to press for Georgia's admission. So has the Obama administration, though without obvious enthusiasm. Last year Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that the 2012 NATO summit in Chicago should be the last such meeting that did not focus on enlargement.

Georgia is considered to be in the first tier of aspirants, along with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Montenegro. Although NATO insiders say opposition to Tbilisi's membership has ebbed, several members remain negative, including Germany. A NATO research paper by Karl-Heinz Kamp of the NATO Defense College admitted that "The crunch point of the enlargement question" is Georgia.

Nevertheless, NATO and Georgia continue to act as if "yes" is the inevitable answer. Alliance officials are regular visitors to Tbilisi. Last April Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen declared: "Georgia is a special partner for NATO." Two months later NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow said in Tbilisi: "At our NATO Summit in Bucharest in 2008, the Allies decided that Georgia will become a member of NATO. The Chicago Summit made clear that Allies stand by that decision and recognized the progress Georgia has made in meeting NATO's standards."

Last September Rasmussen commended Georgia's "very significant" contribution to the Afghan mission and offered NATO's "unwavering support for Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty within its internationally recognized borders." He concluded, "you have a friend in NATO—and a future home in NATO." Prime Minister Ivanishvili visited NATO headquarters in November and in December NATO foreign ministers met with the NATO-Georgia Commission amid much praise for Georgia's participation in ISAF.

Last year the alliance also held its annual "NATO Week in Georgia." Explained NATO Special Representative James Appathurai, "it's very important that the people of Georgia understand not just what the goal of NATO membership is, but also what NATO is and what it does."

Georgian officials certainly understand. NATO membership carries an American security guarantee. To win that commitment Tbilisi is working hard. Michael Cecire of the Foreign Policy Research Institute recently wrote of "Tbilisi's desire to shed its reputation as a Euro-Atlantic security liability, dating back to Georgia's five-day war with Russia in 2008."

The new government reaffirmed Tbilisi's desire to join NATO, doubled Georgian forces in Afghanistan, and continued military training exercises with the U.S. More recently Georgia announced its intention to provide troops for the European Union's training mission in Mali (growing out of France's invasion). Earlier this year Tbilisi promoted military cooperation with Hungary and Lithuania. Most important, Tbilisi announced plans to turn its military into a niche counterterrorism force under the NATO doctrine of "Smart Defense," which envisions a division of labor among members. That is, Georgia will effectively disarm against Russia in the expectation that the West will offer substitute protection.

Tbilisi's desire for great-power protection is understandable. But that is no reason for the U.S. to oblige. The purpose of the alliance is to ensure *American* security. During the Cold War, Washington used NATO to prevent Soviet domination of Eurasia. Moscow was an ideologically driven hegemonic competitor that possessed ample military power and a demonstrated willingness to use force to achieve its ends. Western Europe mattered to U.S. security because it was a large industrial and population center made temporarily vulnerable by the devastation of World War II. Thus, America extended military guarantees as a means to advance its own security.

By this standard the alliance already was a little tattered as the Cold War came to a close. The sclerotic Soviet Union and its unreliable Warsaw Pact allies looked like unlikely aggressors. And the Western Europeans were capable of doing far more for their own defense. Then the collapse of the Soviet Union eliminated both the ideologically driven hegemonic competitor and the residual threat of invasion. NATO's *raison d'être* disappeared almost overnight.

Of course, no member government considered allowing NATO to go the way of the Warsaw Pact. Instead, the alliance decided to expand up to Russia's borders, absorbing not only the former Warsaw Pact members but also the seceding republics from the Soviet Union. Washington ended up guaranteeing the security of states which had been under Moscow's domination throughout the Cold War, and some even before. NATO handed out military commitments like party favors.

In most cases the risk of war was slight. Russia is a difficult, unpleasant actor, but it is not likely to start a war with most of its former subject states. Moscow lacks the will and the ability, as well as any compelling reason to do so.

Georgia is a glaring exception. Tbilisi went out of its way to become a Western outpost in a region of historic Russian interest. At least the Baltic States were independent before being absorbed by Stalin's USSR and had much in common with the European nations they adjoined. Georgia was inviting America into an area where Washington had never been involved. Moscow's displeasure was both predictable and extreme.

Moreover, Saakashvili was reckless even without possessing a formal NATO guarantee. Moscow may have desired a conflict and been prepared to take advantage of it; however, Tbilisi started the shooting. Such a government is not a reliable ally.

NATO is supposed to make Americans safer. Yet expansion to Georgia would make war more likely. A flare-up in fighting between Tbilisi and Abkhazia or South Ossetia could draw in Russia, setting up a NATO confrontation with Russia. The result could be the war that the West managed to avoid throughout the entire Cold War. Of course, Americans would do most of the fighting—and the conflict would have a worrisome possibility of going nuclear, especially given Moscow's relative conventional weakness.

There's no obvious reason to preserve a U.S.-dominated NATO. The Europeans have a larger GDP and population than America; they enjoy roughly ten times the GDP and three times the population of Russia. Europe's defense should be up to the Europeans.

The case is even stronger against further NATO expansion, adding security liabilities rather than assets. If the alliance has any value, it is to deter war. Adding Georgia as a member would make conflict much more likely. Washington should firmly and finally say no to Georgia in NATO.