



## Georgia: Another Dangerous, Loose-Cannon US Client

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Ukraine is Washington's most worrisome security client in Europe. U.S. leaders are incurring grave risks to America in support of a country that is **notoriously corrupt** and increasingly authoritarian. Worse, Kiev engages in abrasive conduct toward its much larger, more powerful Russian neighbor, apparently assuming that Washington has Ukraine's back. However, Ukraine is not the only client that belongs in the category of useless and potentially dangerous US security clients. An even smaller dependent, Georgia, also fits the description. And as with Ukraine, Georgia has the potential to entangle the United States in a needless armed conflict.

On October 1, former president Mikheil Saakashvili returned to Georgia after several years in exile. Even though authorities promptly arrested him because of his conviction for abuse of power during his time in office, Saakashvili remains a serious political player. That is not good news for the United States or for anyone that favors peace and stability in that part of the world. Indeed, during his presidency, he started a war with Russia and sought to drag the United States and NATO into the conflict. Any possibility that he might regain political power should be cause for concern.

As president, Saakashvili pushed a dangerously aggressive policy to recover two Georgian regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which had pursued independence ever since the Soviet Union dissolved at the end of 1991. Russian peacekeeping troops protected those secessionist entities. George W. Bush's administration foolishly encouraged Saakashvili to believe that his country was a valued US ally, and that the United States and NATO would come to Georgia's rescue if it became embroiled in a conflict with Russia. Washington also provided millions of dollars in weaponry to Tbilisi, and even trained Georgian troops.

Bush and other US officials were effusive in their praise of Saakashvili and Georgia's democratic revolution. In a May 2005 speech in Tbilisi, Bush hailed Georgia as "a beacon of liberty" and praised that country's self-styled democrats for creating the template for other "color revolutions." He added (erroneously) that Georgia itself was "building a democratic society where the rights of minorities are respected; where a free press flourishes; where a vigorous opposition is welcomed and where unity is achieved through peace." In reality, Saakashvili's rule already was showing signs of the authoritarianism that would soon become the dominant feature.

Bush also had pushed the NATO allies to give Georgia (and Ukraine) membership in the Alliance. Even though French and German opposition postponed that scheme, Saakashvili apparently believed that NATO would confront Russia militarily in any showdown between Moscow and Tbilisi. In August 2008, he launched a military offensive to regain control of South Ossetia. Unfortunately, the Georgian offensive inflicted casualties on Russian peacekeeping troops, and Moscow responded with a full-scale counteroffensive that soon led to the occupation of several Georgian cities and brought Russian troops to the outskirts of the capital.

When Bush called Saakashvili shortly after the commencement of the Russian offensive, the Georgian president urged him not to abandon a fellow democracy. Bush assured him of Washington's commitment to Georgia's territorial integrity, but tellingly stopped short of pledging military backing. US and NATO troops remained in their barracks, and Saakashvili had to accept a humiliating peace agreement that left South Ossetia and Abkhazia under secure Russian control.

He has never relented in his ambitions to secure Georgia's membership in NATO and to regain Tbilisi's control over either secessionist region. Consequently, his return to power might well trigger an immediate crisis. And even though Saakashvili's domestic political adversaries were able to wrest control of the government from him and his political party, there is little difference between post-Saakashvili leaders and the former president on the issue of recovering Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Instead, they resented his flagrant corruption and increasing autocratic behavior.

Even under the current leadership, Georgia could create a flashpoint between Russia and the West. Indeed, prominent Georgian officials, including Minister of Defense Giorgi Shaishmelashvili, conduct a concerted anti-Russia propaganda campaign, accusing the Kremlin of waging an ongoing "hybrid war" against Georgia. The most prominent grievance such leaders express is that Russia refuses to return the two territories to Tbilisi's rule.

Fortunately, French-German resistance prevented Alliance membership for Georgia at the time of the 2008 crisis – and continues to do so. If Georgia had been a part of NATO in 2008, the United States and other Alliance members would have had an obligation under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty to assist Tbilisi resist the Russian military advance, and that step could have triggered a full-scale war between Russia and NATO. Even without the membership factor, Washington and other NATO capitals should worry about Georgia's continuing ambitions to regain its lost territories.

Furthermore, a confrontation between Georgia and Russia is not the only way Georgia could entangle the United States in a dangerous conflict. Georgia has become involved in a geopolitical power struggle in the Caucasus as part of an alliance with Azerbaijan and Turkey pitted against an equally odd alliance between Iran and Armenia. That rivalry has become increasingly militarized, and it is resulting in tense military standoffs. At the beginning of October, forces from Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey conducted five days of joint military exercises.

Since Turkey is a NATO member, and Washington's relations with Iran remain dysfunctional, US entanglement in a clash between the competing factions in the Caucasus is not far-fetched.

Washington may find itself pressured to defend Georgia militarily even though it has never explicitly made a commitment to do. Barack Obama's administration notably did not continue the Bush administration's arms sales to Tbilisi, President Trump resumed those sales in 2017, and the security relationship between the United States and Georgia has continued to deepen. That development increases the possibility of a messy entanglement that could flow from Georgia's testy relations with either Russia or Armenia.

Georgia is a classic example of a small US security client that offers no meaningful benefit to America, while creating multiple potential risks. The Biden administration should de-emphasize that relationship as soon as possible.

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