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# Joining NATO: a national end or a strategic means for Georgia?

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## Abstract

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Georgia's pursuit of NATO membership faces significant challenges due to Russia's strong opposition, placing the country at a critical geopolitical crossroads. This article examines whether NATO membership is a national end or a strategic means for enhancing Georgia's security. It explores the historical context, strategic dilemmas, and complexities of Georgia's situation, highlighting the impact of Russia's opposition, particularly in light of its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The article argues that NATO membership should be a means to enhance security rather than a precursor to armed conflict. It recommends that Georgia adopt a strategy of strategic patience and diplomacy, recognizing that Euro-Atlantic integration is a long-term endeavour; prioritize dialogue with both NATO and Russia; pursue regional cooperation; and explore alternative pathways to security as well. Ultimately, the article calls for a comprehensive approach to national security that aligns with Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations while addressing immediate security challenges.

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## Keywords:

NATO membership; Euro-Atlantic integration; National security; Bilateral security alliance; Neutrality; Regional stability; Strategic patience; NATO expansion.

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Georgia stands at a critical juncture in its quest for Euro-Atlantic integration, with the question of joining NATO looming large. However, the path towards membership is fraught with challenges and obstacles, chiefly among them being Russia's vehement opposition. The spectre of Russian intervention, as evidenced by its aggression towards Ukraine, casts a shadow over Georgia's aspirations, raising the crucial question: Is NATO membership a national end in itself or merely a strategic means to achieve the ultimate goal of national security for Georgia?

Russia's stance against NATO expansion is deeply entrenched, rooted in historical grievances and perceptions of Western betrayal. President Putin's narrative of NATO encroachment into Russia's sphere of influence finds resonance in past assurances allegedly made by Western leaders, though disputed by some. The invasion of Ukraine in 2022, justified by Mr. Putin as a preemptive measure against NATO's potential expansion, underscores the severity of Russia's opposition. As NATO contemplates its stance on Georgian membership, balancing strategic imperatives with the need to manage tensions with Russia, Georgia finds itself in a precarious position.

The dilemma for Georgia is multifaceted, encompassing security concerns, economic and political pressures, and the broader implications for regional stability. While Georgia seeks security guarantees and integration into the Euro-Atlantic community through NATO membership, it risks provoking further Russian aggression. Moreover, navigating the delicate balance between its aspirations and the realities of Russian opposition requires adept diplomatic manoeuvring.

In light of these complexities, the words of Richard K. Betts resonate, highlighting the importance of ensuring sufficient military capability to match adversaries. For Georgia, joining NATO should be a means to enhance national security, not a precursor to armed conflict with Russia. As it weighs the risks and rewards of Euro-Atlantic integration, Georgia must tread cautiously, mindful of the intricate geopolitical landscape and the imperative of maintaining regional stability.

Against this backdrop, the article delves into the challenges and obstacles facing Georgia as it contemplates joining NATO. Through a nuanced analysis of geopolitical dynamics, historical context, and strategic imperatives, it seeks to shed light on the complex decision-making process confronting Georgian policymakers. It suggests that the primary aim of joining a military alliance should be to enhance national security and protect the interests of the nation, rather than becoming embroiled in conflict or exacerbating tensions. It underscores the importance of strategic decision-making and emphasizes that military alliances should serve as instruments to achieve broader national security objectives rather than sources of potential conflict.

The article's methodology includes a comprehensive review of historical events, political developments, key NATO-Georgia cooperation milestones, significant security challenges faced by Georgia, social and cultural factors, the benefits of

NATO membership, and Russian opposition to Georgia's NATO membership. This multifaceted approach ensures a thorough understanding of the complex geopolitical landscape and informs the analysis of Georgia's NATO aspirations.

Ultimately, the article tries to answer the questions: Is NATO membership a national end or a strategic means for Georgia to achieve its national security and stability? And if it is a means, should Georgia consider other options as well, such as a bilateral security alliance with powerful partners or neutrality with security guarantees?

## Historical Context

### *NATO Enlargement*

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 made NATO expansion crucial for the United States and Central and Eastern European countries seeking protection from potential Russian aggression and integration with the West. Leaders like Poland's Lech Wałęsa and the Czech Republic's Václav Havel highlighted the importance of NATO membership for safeguarding their freedoms ([Barney 2019](#)).

Initially, the Clinton administration opposed NATO enlargement, hoping a democratic Russia would ensure European security. However, internal US debates, led by National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, shifted the policy. By 1993, the Clinton administration pursued a "Europe whole and free," integrating Central Europeans into NATO and the EU, driven by their democratic progress and Russia's rising nationalism ([Kozmiński and Fried 2024](#)).

By 1999, NATO included Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. The expansion continued, adding seven Central and Eastern European countries by 2004; Albania and Croatia in 2009; Montenegro in 2017; the Republic of North Macedonia in 2020; and Sweden and Finland in 2024 ([NATO 2024a](#)). While this facilitated economic development and security in these regions, it also intensified Russian antagonism.

NATO's enlargement was paired with maintaining strong relations with Russia. The 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act assured no deployment of nuclear weapons in new member territories and no substantial permanent stationing of combat forces, aiming to ease Russian concerns while integrating Central European countries ([NATO 2024b](#)).

Russia vehemently opposed NATO's eastward expansion. In 1997, President Boris Yeltsin unsuccessfully sought assurances from President Bill Clinton to exclude former Soviet republics from NATO. Despite US efforts to mitigate Russia's displeasure with financial support and diplomatic overtures, tensions persisted ([Sullivan 2022](#)).

NATO's expansion over the past twenty-five years has profoundly influenced the geopolitical landscape of Europe. Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 aimed to reclaim influence over the region. Other former Soviet-

controlled Eastern European nations, particularly the Baltic states, likely avoided a similar fate due to their NATO membership.

The contrasting paths of NATO-Russia relations and NATO enlargement highlight the success of the latter. While President Boris Yeltsin tolerated NATO's expansion, his successor, Vladimir Putin, pursued authoritarianism and imperial ambitions, leading to the current conflict with Ukraine. Some authors consider that NATO's expansion pushed these conflicts further east, preventing Russia from dominating Central Europe (Kozmiński and Fried 2024).

### ***History of NATO-Georgia Cooperation***

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the former Soviet republics faced significant challenges including conflicts, economic stagnation, corruption, and dysfunctional state institutions. Fragile security was the most overriding problem for a small country like Georgia.

Some former Soviet republics remained in Moscow's orbit, while others chose to develop towards the West. Only Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia succeeded in becoming part of the Western world. The example of the Baltic states is promising for countries undergoing democratic transition.

Georgia set out on the path towards Western development immediately after gaining independence and declared its aspiration to establish close cooperation with the European Union and NATO. However, economic and political turmoil, territorial conflicts, and civil war hindered Georgia's Western development, slowing its integration process compared to the Baltic countries.

The goal of Georgia's security and foreign policy is to create an environment for safe, democratic, and stable development. European and Euro-Atlantic integration was defined as the main priority of Georgia's foreign and security policy after gaining independence (POG 2011).

NATO-Georgia relations were established in 1992 when Georgia joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC), later renamed the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) in 1997. This cooperation was further expanded in 1994 when Georgia joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, enhancing defence and security cooperation. Notably, at the 2002 NATO summit in Prague, President Eduard Shevardnadze announced Georgia's aspiration to join NATO.

In 2004, Georgia became the first country to develop an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with NATO. This action plan did not provide a mechanism for joining NATO but elevated the level of cooperation. The NATO International Service provided annual performance reports on Georgia's progress. By 2008, Georgia had received five positive performance reports.

On September 21, 2006, NATO started Intensified Dialogue on Membership Questions with Georgia, involving multiple consultations on political, security, and

defence issues, among others. At the NATO Bucharest Summit in April 2008, the Allies agreed that Georgia would eventually become a NATO member.

Following the Russian military aggression against Georgia in August 2008, NATO established the NATO-Georgia Commission (NGC) to assist Georgia in recovery and oversee the implementation of the Bucharest Summit decision. The NGC declaration was signed during a visit by the North Atlantic Council to Georgia in September 2008. NATO foreign ministers supported the development of the Annual National Programme (ANP) within the NGC framework. Georgia's implementation of the ANP is unprecedented, as it is typically reserved for states granted Membership Action Plan (MAP) status.

The North Atlantic Cooperation Council has paid multiple visits to Georgia, underscoring the Alliance's unwavering political support. In December 2011, NATO Foreign Ministers referred to Georgia as an aspirant country. The 2012 Chicago Summit marked an important step in Georgia's NATO integration, with Georgia participating in all partner meetings.

At the 2014 NATO Summit in Wales, the Allies decided to develop the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP) to strengthen Georgia's defence capabilities and advance its preparations for NATO membership.

In 2015, the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Centre (JTEC) was launched, significantly contributing to Georgia-NATO interoperability.

The Defence Institution Building School (DIBS), inaugurated in 2016, supports good governance in the security sector and strengthens national defence and security capabilities.

At the Warsaw Summit in 2016, additional NATO assistance to Georgia in defence was decided, and Georgia's involvement in strengthening Black Sea security was emphasized.

The 2018 Brussels Summit marked the first time NATO Heads of State and Government discussed issues specifically related to Georgia. The declaration adopted at the summit reiterated the commitment that Georgia will become a NATO member.

In October 2019, the North Atlantic Council paid another visit to Georgia, further solidifying political support. The December 2020 approval of the updated SNGP by NATO Foreign Ministers continues to strengthen Georgia's defence capabilities.

The 2022 Madrid Summit approved tailored support measures for Georgia to enhance its defence capabilities and NATO engagement. Over the years, Georgia has proved to be a valuable partner and aspirant country, with recognized progress in democratic reforms, armed forces modernization, and contributions to international security (NATO 2024c; Info Center n.d. a).

In summary, Georgia's relationship with NATO has evolved significantly since the early 1990s, marked by increasing levels of cooperation and commitment from both

sides. The country's efforts to join NATO are supported by a robust framework of political dialogue, practical cooperation, and mutual support in the face of external threats, particularly from Russia.

### ***Key Events: Highlighting Significant Milestones***

#### *The Bucharest Summit Declaration (April 2008)*

A pivotal moment in Georgia-NATO relations came during the NATO Summit in Bucharest in April 2008. At this summit, NATO Allies agreed that Georgia would eventually become a NATO member, provided it met all necessary requirements. This decision was a strong political signal of support for Georgia's aspirations, and it has been reconfirmed at successive NATO summits. This commitment underscored NATO's support for Georgia's sovereignty and its right to determine its own future without outside interference.

#### *The 2008 War with Russia*

In August 2008, Georgia faced a significant security challenge when Russia invaded its territory, leading to a brief but intense conflict. This invasion resulted in Russia recognizing the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, a move condemned by NATO and most of the international community. In response, NATO has consistently expressed support for Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty within its internationally recognized borders. The Alliance has called for Russia to withdraw its forces stationed in Georgia without the country's consent and to reverse its recognition of the separatist regions.

#### *The NATO-Georgia Commission (NGC)*

Established in September 2008, the NATO-Georgia Commission provides a framework for close political dialogue and cooperation, supporting Georgia's reform efforts and Euro-Atlantic aspirations. This commission has been instrumental in facilitating Georgia's preparation for eventual NATO membership through the development and implementation of Annual National Programs.

#### *Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP)*

Launched at the 2014 NATO Summit in Wales, the SNGP is a comprehensive set of measures aimed at strengthening Georgia's defence capabilities and advancing its NATO membership preparations. The package was updated in December 2020 to include new initiatives such as improving military medical capacity, English language training, and the codification and standardization system to ensure greater interoperability with NATO.

#### *Recent Developments*

At the 2022 Madrid Summit, NATO Allies endorsed tailored support measures for Georgia in light of the current security environment, particularly following Russia's aggression against Ukraine. These measures aim to accelerate Georgia's transition from Soviet-era equipment to NATO standards and enhance its situational

awareness. The NATO Liaison Office, established in Georgia in 2010, continues to support the country's reform efforts and its cooperation programs with NATO.

Georgia remains an active contributor to NATO-led operations, participating in maritime surveillance through Operation Sea Guardian and previously contributing troops to the Kosovo Force (KFOR) and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. Additionally, Georgia is one of the Enhanced Opportunity Partners, recognizing its significant contributions to NATO operations and objectives (NATO 2024c).

## **Security Considerations of Georgia**

Recent international and regional developments have significantly altered Georgia's security environment. The Russian Federation's military aggression against Georgia in August 2008 and Ukraine in February 2022 demonstrated that some nations still consider military force a viable tool for achieving political objectives.

Georgia has faced significant challenges due to Russian aggression, starting with 70 years of Soviet occupation in the 20th century. Since its independence in 1991, Georgia has struggled with political and economic instability, exacerbated by Russian-supported separatist movements. The conflicts of the early 1990s and the 2008 war led to the occupation of Georgian territories by Russia, marked by ethnic cleansing and military aggression. Russia's recognition of these regions as independent states and the deployment of military forces violate Georgia's sovereignty and hinder its development. The militarization of these areas destabilizes the region, with evidence of Russia using these territories to recruit and train terrorists. The lack of control over occupied territories fosters conditions for transnational crime, including terrorism and organized crime.

The conflicts have displaced around 500,000 people from Georgian territories, making it a significant challenge to ensure their rights, including their right to return and own property.

Environmental threats from illegal resource exploitation in occupied territories pose significant risks. Russia's attempts to alter the demographic balance in these areas challenge Georgia's cultural identity and development. Promoting civic integration and protecting cultural heritage are essential for national unity and identity, with efforts needed to prevent intentional damage to cultural monuments in occupied territories.

The presence of Russian forces in occupied Georgian territories poses a continual threat of renewed aggression, aiming to undermine Georgia's independence and democratic progress. International support, including the European Union Monitoring Mission, is crucial in deterring further Russian aggression.

Regional conflicts, such as the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, also pose threats to security and stability in the Caucasus.

Economic instability can lead to social tensions and reduced state revenues, making economic growth and competitiveness essential for Georgia's stability and security. Additionally, energy independence and cybersecurity are vital, requiring the diversification of energy sources and protection of cyberspace.

To summarize, the Russian occupation and military aggression have severely worsened Georgia's security environment and affected regional stability. Strengthening European integration, fostering democratic institutions, and maintaining economic growth are crucial for Georgia's security and development. Strategic partnerships and free trade with international entities support Georgia's progress and stability (POG 2011).

## **Benefits for Georgia from NATO Membership**

### ***Collective Defense: NATO's Article 5 and Its Benefits for Georgia***

The principle of collective defence is fundamental to NATO's founding treaty, enshrined in Article 5. This principle asserts that an attack against one NATO member is considered an attack against all, committing the entire Alliance to respond collectively. Article 5 has only been invoked once in NATO's history, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, illustrating the gravity and solidarity this principal commands.

Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty states:

"The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in the exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area." (NATO 2023a).

For Georgia, aspiring NATO membership carries significant potential benefits under Article 5. Given Georgia's complex security environment and the threats it faces, particularly from the Russian Federation, NATO's collective defence principle could provide a powerful deterrent against aggression. Here's how:

*Enhanced Security and Deterrence:* Joining NATO would mean that any military aggression against Georgia would trigger a collective response from all NATO members. This collective guarantee would substantially deter potential aggressors, particularly Russia, from attempting further military actions against Georgia.



*Access to Military Resources and Support:* As a NATO member, Georgia would benefit from the Alliance's extensive military resources and capabilities. This includes NATO's standing forces on active duty, which contribute to collective defence efforts and can be deployed rapidly in times of crisis. Additionally, NATO's integrated air and missile defence systems would enhance Georgia's ability to protect its territory and population.

*Military Modernization:* NATO membership necessitates significant military reforms and assists in these processes, fundamentally transforming the defence capabilities of new and aspiring member states. The journey towards NATO membership, guided by the principles of the 1949 Washington Treaty (NATO 2022) and the 1995 Study on NATO Enlargement (NATO 2008), requires countries to undertake comprehensive military reforms aimed at achieving interoperability with NATO forces, enhancing defence capabilities, and contributing to the overall security of the Euro-Atlantic area.

*Political Solidarity and Support:* The political solidarity enshrined in NATO membership means that Georgia would gain robust diplomatic support from other member countries. This collective backing can be crucial in international forums and negotiations, reinforcing Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity on the global stage. It would firmly anchor Georgia in the Euro-Atlantic community, reinforcing its sovereignty and independence from Russian influence. Membership would increase Georgia's influence in international forums, allowing it to participate in high-level discussions on global security issues.

*Participation in Joint Exercises and Training:* Membership would enable Georgian forces to participate in joint NATO exercises and training programs. This cooperation would improve the interoperability of Georgian forces with NATO allies, enhancing their capabilities and readiness. For example, NATO's experience in counter-terrorism and cyber defence would be invaluable to Georgia, given the threats it faces in these areas (NATO 2024d).

In conclusion, NATO's collective defence under Article 5 offers Georgia a robust framework for enhancing its national security and deterring aggression. The solidarity, military support, and political backing that come with NATO membership could significantly bolster Georgia's ability to navigate its challenging security landscape and pursue its Euro-Atlantic integration aspirations.

## **Economic and Development Benefits**

Enhanced security through NATO membership can also have positive economic effects. With the assurance of NATO's collective defence, Georgia could see increased investor confidence, leading to greater economic development and prosperity. The stability and security provided by the NATO umbrella create a

favourable environment for investors, both domestic and foreign. Countries within the alliance benefit from a perception of reduced geopolitical risk, which is a key factor in attracting foreign direct investment (FDI). The empirical data supports this notion, with several examples of NATO member states experiencing substantial economic growth and increased FDI following their accession to the alliance. For instance, Estonia and Latvia, which joined NATO in 2004, saw significant increases in foreign investment and economic activity. These countries experienced enhanced trade integration with Europe and Central Asia, leading to improved economic resilience. Similarly, Bulgaria and Lithuania saw a surge in economic activity and foreign investment post-NATO membership, highlighting the economic benefits of being part of the alliance ([Guruli 2016](#)).

Georgia, in its pursuit of NATO membership, can anticipate similar economic advantages. By aligning its defence policies and contributing to NATO missions, Georgia signals its commitment to stability and security, which can instil confidence among investors. This commitment, coupled with NATO's economic clout — constituting nearly 45.65% of the world's total economic output ([Hartwell 2024](#)) — positions Georgia favourably for increased foreign investment. This influx of capital can drive economic growth, create jobs, and foster technological advancements, ultimately enhancing the overall economic landscape of the country.

Beyond attracting foreign investment, NATO alignment can also open doors to substantial economic aid and development programs. The alliance has a history of facilitating economic development and providing assistance to its members and partners, thereby contributing to their economic stability and growth. This assistance often comes in the form of military aid, technological support, and capacity-building initiatives, which have direct and indirect economic benefits. Georgia has already benefited from various NATO-aligned programs. For example, the European Reassurance Initiative, announced by then-President Barack Obama, allocated funds for capacity building and operational enhancements in response to Russian aggression. Georgia, alongside other Eastern European countries, received portions of this funding, which included an exercise on the Black Sea and additional financial support for critical operational gaps and increased information sharing ([CSIS 2016](#)).

NATO alignment offers Georgia substantial economic advantages through increased foreign investment and economic growth, as well as through economic aid and development programs. The stability and security provided by the alliance create a conducive environment for investment, while NATO's economic assistance programs further enhance Georgia's economic resilience and development. As Georgia continues to pursue closer ties with NATO, these economic benefits underscore the strategic importance of the alliance for the country's long-term prosperity and stability.

### ***Social and Cultural Factors***

Public opinion in Georgia overwhelmingly supports NATO membership, reflecting a strong desire for Euro-Atlantic integration. According to a poll conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and Caucasus Research Resource Centre (CRRC) in Georgia, 73 per cent of Georgians are in favour of joining NATO. This robust support underscores the population's aspiration for enhanced security and alignment with Western military and political structures ([NDI 2023](#)).

The strong public support for NATO membership suggests that Georgians see the alliance as a pathway to greater security and stability. This perception is critical, especially in light of the ongoing economic challenges facing the country. The desire for NATO membership is part of a broader trend of Euro-Atlantic integration, which is also reflected in the high levels of support for EU membership, standing at 81 per cent ([NDI 2023](#)). This dual support highlights a clear and settled will among the Georgian public for integration with Western institutions.

The aspiration for NATO and EU membership is not just a political or economic decision for Georgia; it also represents a significant cultural shift towards Western values and standards. This cultural integration is evident in various aspects of Georgian life. For instance, the alignment with Western defence practices and military standards has transformed the Georgian military, making it more professional and interoperable with NATO forces. Georgian troops, often seen in NATO-style uniforms and equipment, symbolize this shift towards Western military norms.

Moreover, societal values in Georgia are increasingly reflecting Western ideals. There is a growing advocacy for democratic governance, transparency, and the rule of law. Public discourse increasingly emphasizes human rights, gender equality, and social justice, aligning more closely with the values upheld by NATO and the European Union.

Educational and cultural exchanges with Western countries have further accelerated this integration. Georgian students, professionals, and academics frequently participate in exchange programs, bringing back with them Western ideas and practices. These exchanges foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of Western cultural and societal norms, which in turn influence domestic attitudes and policies. The high level of support for more women in elected office, as indicated by the NDI poll, is a testament to the changing cultural landscape in Georgia. This desire for greater gender equality in political representation is a reflection of broader societal shifts towards inclusivity and diversity, core values of Western democracies.

In conclusion, Georgia's strong public support for NATO membership and its broader Euro-Atlantic integration efforts signify a deep and ongoing societal shift towards Western values and standards. This cultural transformation, driven by both political aspirations and grassroots changes, is reshaping Georgia into a society that increasingly mirrors the democratic, human rights-focused, and inclusive norms of the Western world.

### ***Means to Broader Ends***

Linking Georgia's NATO membership aspirations with its efforts towards European Union (EU) integration is essential for broader regional stability and security. Georgia's commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration aligns with its broader foreign policy goal of integrating into the common European space.

The signing of the Association Agreement between Georgia and the EU, along with Georgia's participation in the Energy Community and visa-free travel to the Schengen area, demonstrates the country's tangible progress towards European integration. These developments not only strengthen Georgia's European identity but also contribute to regional stability by fostering closer ties with EU member states.

Moreover, Georgia's high-level strategic dialogue on security issues with the EU underscores the importance of cooperation in addressing common security challenges. By engaging in discussions on security and defence, Georgia aims to enhance regional stability and contribute to broader security initiatives in collaboration with the EU.

The successful implementation of the Association Agreement serves as a roadmap for Georgia's modernization, encompassing various spheres of political, social, and economic life. By aligning with EU standards and norms, Georgia seeks to strengthen democracy, governance, security, and regional cooperation, thereby promoting stability in the region ([Info Center n.d. b](#)).

Furthermore, *Georgia's constitutional amendments emphasizing full integration into both the EU and NATO underscore the country's unwavering commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration (POG 1995)*. This commitment not only enhances Georgia's security but also contributes to regional stability by promoting cooperation and collaboration among Euro-Atlantic partners.

In summary, Georgia's aspirations for NATO membership are closely linked to its efforts towards EU integration, with both initiatives aimed at fostering regional stability and security. By aligning with European values and principles, Georgia contributes to broader efforts to promote peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic region.

## **Challenges and Obstacles**

The challenges and obstacles faced by Georgia in its pursuit of NATO membership are complex and multifaceted, involving significant geopolitical tensions and historical grievances. This section examines the primary challenges Georgia encounters, including Russian opposition and NATO's cautious stance, and explores potential strategies Georgia could consider to navigate this intricate landscape.

### ***Russian Opposition***

NATO expansion is a contentious issue for Russia, which views it as a threat to its sphere of influence. The expansion has been met with strong opposition from

Russian leaders, who feel betrayed by Western assurances made during the post-Soviet period that NATO would not expand eastward.

Russian opposition to Georgia's NATO membership poses a significant challenge to the country's aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration.

The warning issued by Russia against Ukraine and Georgia seeking NATO membership underscores the geopolitical tensions surrounding Euro-Atlantic integration efforts in the region. In 2008, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev met individually with the leaders of Ukraine and Georgia, emphasizing Moscow's concerns about their aspirations to join the NATO defence alliance. The backdrop of these meetings was a yearly economic forum in Saint Petersburg, where leaders from former Soviet Union countries gathered for discussions ([Voanews 2009](#)).

NATO membership, promised to Georgia at the Bucharest summit in 2008, was a key factor in the conflict between Russia and Georgia. While Georgia's strategic importance to Russia differs from that of Ukraine, Moscow's primary security concerns in the region involve religious extremism, terrorism, and separatism rather than traditional power balances ([Trenin 2011](#)).

In 2022, President Putin used Ukraine's steps toward NATO membership as a key justification for the invasion, arguing that Russia deserves a sphere of influence in its neighbouring regions.

Historical grievances, such as the perception of NATO exploiting Russia's weakness in the 1990s, fuel Putin's narrative. Prominent figures like George F. Kennan predicted that NATO expansion would provoke nationalist and anti-Western sentiments in Russia ([Piirimäe 2024](#)), which aligns with Putin's stance today. Despite these tensions, NATO insists that each European country has the right to choose its alliances, a point that has exacerbated the situation.

Putin's aggression is partly driven by the belief that if Russia does not control Ukraine, the West will, posing a direct threat to Russian security. This historical perspective underscores Russia's actions as defensive, although the West views them as aggressive. To mitigate these tensions, any lasting peace settlement might need to address both the historical security concerns and the recent ideological threats posed by a democratic Ukraine ([Moskowitz 2022](#)).

Russian President Vladimir Putin claims that NATO's eastward expansion since the end of the Cold War is a betrayal by the West. This sentiment has roots in a 1993 letter from then-Russian President Boris Yeltsin to U.S. President Bill Clinton, where Yeltsin expressed concern about Eastern European countries joining NATO. Yeltsin argued that NATO expansion would isolate Russia and violate the spirit of the 1990 Two Plus Four Treaty on German reunification ([NSA 2016](#)).

Despite Russia's concerns, the expansion of NATO continued, incorporating 14 countries from Eastern and South-eastern Europe, which intensified Russian

grievances. President Putin has frequently asserted that the West promised in the 1990s that NATO would not expand eastward, using this claim to demand guarantees that Ukraine will not join NATO.

Discussions from the early 1990s show conflicting accounts about whether such promises were made. Some Western officials, like U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, have denied making any pledges, while others, including former U.S. ambassador to Moscow Jack Matlock, have suggested “categorical assurances” were given. Although there were no legally binding agreements to prevent NATO expansion, the ongoing eastward movement has consistently been a point of contention for Russia, which views it as a security threat. The resulting tension has poisoned relations between Moscow and the West, complicating diplomatic and security arrangements in Europe ([Wiegrefe 2022](#)).

Vladimir Putin’s remarks regarding Ukraine’s potential NATO membership underscore Russia’s staunch opposition to any further eastward expansion of the alliance. Putin’s assertion that allowing Ukraine to join NATO could lead to a conflict with severe consequences, including the possibility of nuclear war, reflects Russia’s determination to prevent NATO from encroaching on what it perceives as its sphere of influence. Putin emphasizes Russia’s nuclear capabilities, highlighting the disparity between NATO’s military strength and Russia’s nuclear arsenal. Moreover, Russia has proposed draft treaties with NATO and the United States seeking security guarantees, including a prohibition on further eastward expansion of NATO. However, these proposals have been met with resistance from the United States and its NATO allies, who view them as attempts to undermine NATO’s principles of collective defence and deterrence ([Starkey 2022](#)).

It is noteworthy that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is often framed as a reaction to the threat of NATO expansion, even by Western officials. At the joint meeting of the European Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) and the Subcommittee on Security and Defence (SEDE) on September 7, 2023, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that President Vladimir Putin “went to war to prevent NATO, more NATO, close to his borders” ([NATO 2023b](#)). Stoltenberg mentioned that Putin sent a draft treaty to NATO in 2021, demanding no further expansion, which NATO rejected. He asserted that this rejection was a significant factor that contributed to Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine. Stoltenberg also noted that, contrary to Putin’s intentions, the result has been an increase in NATO presence, including Finland’s membership and Sweden’s anticipated accession ([NATO 2023b](#)). Earlier, US officials, including Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, also pointed out that preventing Ukraine from joining NATO was one of the main motives for Putin’s invasion ([Voanews 2023](#)).

Despite this understanding among some officials, many Western media outlets have characterized the invasion as “unprovoked,” focusing on the broader context of aggression rather than the specific motivations related to NATO expansion.

However, historical warnings from diplomats and intelligence officials suggested that NATO's eastward expansion would provoke Russian hostility (Marcetic 2023). The disconnect between these official insights and public discourse complicates understanding the war's root causes and hampers efforts to secure lasting peace.

### *NATO's Position*

Contrary to Russian claims, NATO says its enlargement did not cause Russia's aggression. Rather, Putin's actions have spurred NATO to consider Ukrainian membership more seriously and prompted Finland and Sweden to seek alliance membership—actions unlikely before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. NATO has long affirmed its openness to new members while being cautious about Russia, especially regarding Ukraine.

Experts argue that NATO enlargement has provided stability in Central and Eastern Europe and that Russian aggression would likely have occurred regardless. Tensions between Russia and the West have fluctuated despite ongoing NATO expansion, often correlating more with democratic trends in Eurasia than with NATO's actions. Putin's invasion may also stem from his belief that the timing was opportune, given the U.S. focus on China and the perceived closing window to curb Ukraine's westward drift. The invasion has intensified discussions about NATO membership for Ukraine, with the argument that only NATO's Article 5 can effectively deter future Russian aggression. The recent wave of NATO enlargement is a reaction to Putin's aggression, not its cause. While deterrence is challenging, NATO's collective defence and increased European investment in defence are seen as crucial to preventing further Russian advances (Goldgeier 2023).

NATO views Russia as the most significant threat to the security and stability of the Euro-Atlantic area, citing Russia's aggressive actions, disinformation campaigns, and attempts to control other nations through coercion and subversion. Despite NATO's stance as a defensive alliance not seeking confrontation, it has significantly strengthened its deterrence and defence measures in response to Russian threats (NATO 2024e).

Russia claims NATO is at war with it in Ukraine and asserts NATO promised not to expand after the Cold War. However, NATO counters these "myths", stating it supports Ukraine's right to self-defence and never made such promises. Decisions on NATO membership are made by consensus among all allies, and NATO's open-door policy has been consistent since its founding. NATO's deployments and exercises, including those in the Baltic States and Poland, are described as defensive measures in response to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and actions in Ukraine. NATO maintains that these deployments are not a threat to Russia and are within the bounds of international agreements. NATO also emphasizes its willingness to engage in diplomatic efforts to manage risks and prevent escalation, despite Russia's increasingly aggressive behaviour (NATO 2024f).

As for NATO's current stance on Georgian membership, it remains cautious, balancing the strategic imperative of strengthening Euro-Atlantic security with the need to manage tensions with Russia. While NATO has reaffirmed its commitment to the open-door policy and support for Georgia's territorial integrity, concerns persist regarding the potential for heightened tensions with Russia and the impact on regional stability.

### ***The Current Situation as a Source of Dilemma for Georgia***

Russia's staunch opposition to Georgia's NATO membership poses a significant challenge to the country's aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration. This opposition is rooted in broader geopolitical tensions and historical grievances. Russia views NATO expansion as a threat to its sphere of influence and has consistently reacted strongly against it. The issue of NATO expansion has long been contentious for Russia. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western assurances allegedly promised no eastward expansion of NATO, a claim disputed by various officials but deeply ingrained in Russian political discourse. President Putin has frequently cited these assurances to justify his opposition to NATO's growth, viewing it as a betrayal of post-Cold War agreements.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, *justified by President Putin as a preventive measure against NATO's potential expansion into Ukraine*, underscores the severity of Russia's stance. As mentioned above, even NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and U.S. officials have noted that preventing Ukraine's NATO membership was a primary motive behind Russia's aggressive actions.

The 'security dilemma' is another significant factor in Russian aggression against Ukraine. This theory posits that excessive military preparedness by one state can heighten the risk of conflict by increasing tensions with other states that perceive these actions as threatening. According to Betts (1995), when states are suspicious of each other's intentions and feel threatened by their military capabilities, a robust military build-up can exacerbate tensions and potentially provoke preemptive strikes. Thus, Ukraine's intensive military build-up since 2014 ([Sanders 2023](#); [US DOS 2024](#)) could have contributed to concerns in Russia, possibly influencing its decision to act militarily.

Uncertainty remains about the war's end and its outcomes. The IMF's baseline scenario predicted the war would wind down in early 2024, leading to gradual investment and reconstruction. The downside scenario anticipates the war will intensify, last longer, and cause further losses for Ukraine ([IMF 2023](#)). It is clear that the latter scenario is unfolding. In addition, as mentioned above, back in 2008, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's meetings with the leaders of Ukraine and Georgia at the economic forum in St. Petersburg highlighted Moscow's concerns. The meetings emphasized Russia's warning against NATO membership for these countries, reflecting the broader geopolitical tensions.



Also noteworthy are the words of Mr. Putin, who outlined in detail the conditions for ending the war in Ukraine, saying that Russia would cease military operations only *if Kiev renounced its aspirations to join NATO* and ceded control over four regions claimed by Moscow ([CNN 2024](#)).

Despite Russia's opposition, NATO maintains its open-door policy, affirming that each European country has the right to choose its alliances. This principle, however, has exacerbated tensions, as Russia views NATO's expansion as a direct threat to its security. Notably, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin recently stated that NATO expansion is unlikely in the near future. He emphasized that the decision to expand NATO rests with its 32 member countries and that there is no current intention to pursue further expansion. Austin acknowledged that while some countries might always seek to join NATO, the alliance's immediate focus is on integrating its newest members, Sweden and Finland. He added that the alliance members likely prefer to see stability and the successful incorporation of the new members before considering further expansion ([Reuters 2024](#)).

The ongoing debate over NATO's role and expansion complicates Georgia's situation, as it must navigate its aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration against the backdrop of Russian opposition and potential retaliatory measures.

The current context heightens the dilemma for Georgia, which faces vehement opposition from Russia regarding its NATO ambitions: *What should Georgia do if Putin issues the same ultimatum as he did to Ukraine?*

### ***Current Dilemma for Georgia***

*Security Concerns:* Georgia's push for NATO membership is driven by its desire for security guarantees and integration into the Euro-Atlantic community. However, this ambition places it at odds with Russia, which has demonstrated its willingness to use military force to prevent further NATO expansion.

*Economic and Political Pressure:* Georgia faces significant economic and political pressures from Russia. Moscow's opposition to NATO membership for Georgia includes potential economic sanctions and political interference, aiming to destabilize the country and deter its integration efforts.

*Regional Stability:* The tension between NATO's open-door policy and Russia's opposition has broader implications for regional stability. Georgia's pursuit of NATO membership could provoke further Russian aggression, complicating efforts to maintain peace and security in the region.

*Diplomatic Balancing Act:* Georgian leaders must balance their aspirations for NATO membership with the need to manage relations with Russia. This requires careful diplomatic manoeuvring to avoid provoking further conflict while seeking support from Western allies.

In this case, Richard K. Betts' remarks are relevant, emphasizing that a state's primary responsibility is to ensure it possesses sufficient potential military capability, either from its own resources or through alliances, to match its adversaries. In his "Military Readiness: Concepts, Choices, Consequences" Betts argues that a government lacking the necessary alliances or economic resources to develop adequate military capability should not consider military action, as "war cannot serve its interests better than surrender" (Betts 1995, 28-29).

By seeking to join NATO, Georgia risks provoking an armed conflict with Russia instead of gaining the security it expects from integration into the Euro-Atlantic Community.

To summarize, Georgia's aspirations for NATO membership place it in a complex and precarious position. The pursuit of Euro-Atlantic integration creates significant geopolitical tension due to Russia's staunch opposition and the broader dynamics of NATO expansion. Both Russian opposition and NATO's cautious approach present substantial challenges to Georgia's goals. Addressing these challenges will require concerted efforts from both Georgia and its NATO partners to navigate the intricate geopolitical landscape, advance Euro-Atlantic integration, and maintain regional stability. Within this challenging context, *Georgia must balance its security goals against the risks of escalating conflict with Russia*. Joining any military alliance should be considered *a means to achieve national security, not a source of devastating conflict*. Moreover, if NATO membership is viewed as a strategic means to enhance national security, Georgia shouldn't avoid considering other options such as a *bilateral security alliance with powerful partners or neutrality with security guarantees*.

Exploring bilateral security alliances with powerful partners, such as the United States or key European countries, could provide immediate security benefits and foster deeper strategic partnerships. These alliances might be framed as transitional measures that support Georgia's ultimate integration into NATO by building stronger defence capabilities and military-political relationships.

Similarly, adopting a stance of neutrality with robust security guarantees could be considered a viable short-term strategy. This approach would require extensive diplomatic negotiations to secure binding guarantees from major powers or international organizations, ensuring Georgia's security while avoiding direct confrontation with Russia. Neutrality, backed by security guarantees, might help reduce regional tensions and create a more stable environment conducive to long-term integration efforts.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Georgia stands at a critical juncture in its pursuit of NATO membership, facing formidable challenges and complex geopolitical dynamics. The country's aspirations

for Euro-Atlantic integration clash with Russia's staunch opposition, underscoring the multifaceted dilemma it confronts. As Georgia navigates this intricate landscape, several key recommendations emerge to guide its path forward.

**Strategic Patience and Diplomacy:** Georgia should adopt a strategy of strategic patience, recognizing that Euro-Atlantic integration is a long-term endeavour that requires diplomatic finesse and perseverance. Prioritizing dialogue and engagement with both NATO and Russia can help mitigate tensions and create opportunities for constructive cooperation.

**Regional Cooperation and Confidence-Building Measures:** Georgia should actively pursue regional cooperation and confidence-building measures to foster stability and security in the wider Black Sea region. By strengthening partnerships with neighbouring countries and multilateral organizations, Georgia can enhance its security and resilience against external pressures.

**Balanced Approach to Security:** Georgian leaders must carefully balance their aspirations for NATO membership with the imperative of managing relations with Russia. This requires a nuanced understanding of Georgia's security interests and a willingness to explore alternative pathways to enhance security and stability in the region. *Joining any military alliance should be considered a strategic means to achieve national security, not a source of devastating conflict.*

**Public Diplomacy and Alliance-Building:** Georgia should invest in public diplomacy efforts to build support for NATO membership both domestically and internationally. By effectively communicating the benefits of Euro-Atlantic integration, Georgia can mobilize public opinion and garner political support for its NATO aspirations. Additionally, Georgia should continue to strengthen partnerships with Western allies and demonstrate its commitment to shared security goals.

**Adaptive Strategy and Risk Management:** Georgia must maintain flexibility and adaptability in its approach to NATO membership, recognizing the evolving nature of the geopolitical landscape. This requires a proactive approach to risk management and contingency planning, as well as a *readiness to reassess priorities and strategies in response to changing circumstances.*

Georgia's journey towards NATO membership is fraught with challenges and obstacles, yet it also presents opportunities for enhanced security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic region. By adopting a pragmatic and balanced approach, Georgia can navigate the complexities of Euro-Atlantic integration, safeguard its security interests, and contribute to regional peace and prosperity.

As Georgia charts its course forward, it must remain steadfast in its commitment to security, sovereignty, and Euro-Atlantic integration, *while being mindful of the delicate balance between aspirations and realities on the ground.* Considering options

such as a bilateral security alliance or neutrality with security guarantees is valid, acknowledging that there are multiple paths to achieving security and stability, with NATO membership being one of the means. Given Russia's opposition to NATO expansion and the complex regional dynamics, it is essential for Georgian policymakers to explore all possible options for ensuring national security.

Further research into the implications and viability of alternative security arrangements, such as a bilateral security alliance with powerful partners or adopting a stance of neutrality with security guarantees, is necessary. This approach ensures that Georgia's decision-making process is comprehensive and considers all potential avenues for maintaining national security and regional stability. Given the constitutional mandate for full integration into the EU and NATO, it is crucial to explore how these alternative arrangements can complement, rather than contradict, the long-term strategic goal of Euro-Atlantic integration. Policymakers must carefully examine whether interim security measures, like a bilateral alliance or neutrality, can serve as pragmatic steps towards the broader objective of integration, enhancing Georgia's security and stability in the interim.

Additionally, further research should assess the legal and diplomatic frameworks required to implement these alternative security arrangements without conflicting with the constitutional mandate. This includes exploring potential amendments or legislative adjustments that could provide greater flexibility in Georgia's strategic approach, allowing for a broader range of security options while maintaining the commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration.

By pursuing a thorough analysis of these alternative security pathways, Georgia can develop a more adaptable and resilient national security strategy. This strategy would not only align with constitutional requirements but also address the immediate and evolving security challenges facing the country. Ultimately, a comprehensive and flexible approach will better equip Georgia to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape, safeguard its sovereignty, and achieve its long-term goal of Euro-Atlantic integration.

In conclusion, the current developments and insights by Richard K. Betts discussed in the article leave the question open: *What should Georgia do if Mr. Putin gives it the same ultimatum as in the case of Ukraine?*

#### **Disclaimer**

The views represented in this paper are those of the author and don't reflect the official policy or position of the Government of Georgia and Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani University.

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The author declares no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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