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**GEORGIA AND THE BLACK SEA:
STRATEGIC RELEVANCE
IN A CHANGING
REGIONAL ORDER**

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Executive Summary

The Black Sea has become a critical strategic area for Europe, due to Russia's war in Ukraine and mounting worries about European security, energy, and connectivity. Georgia, at the heart of the Black Sea–South Caucasus nexus, is a structurally important transit state along the Middle Corridor, linking Europe, the Caspian region, and Asia. However, Georgia's credibility with the European Union, NATO, and the United States has been weakened by its political choices marked by authoritarian trends and tacit accommodation with Russia, despite its geographic and infrastructural assets.

Georgia faces two clear paths: it can function mainly as a transit corridor and risk marginalization and de facto integration into Russia's sphere, or it can pursue full alignment with democratic, Western-oriented structures. The former path means authoritarian consolidation, political isolation on international scene and loss of strategic agency leading to the de-facto loss of sovereignty. The latter path requires political clarity, institutional rebuilding, reversal of authoritarian trends and proactive engagement with Euro-Atlantic partners. In return it offers long-term security, autonomy, and regional relevance. Allowing Georgia to fall under Russia's influence would harm not only Georgia, but the West as well. For the West, it would mean the retreat of liberal democracy in the region, the loss of strategic influence in the South Caucasus, and the loss of credibility in the Black Sea region.

Introduction: Georgia and the Changing Black Sea

Neither Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 nor the annexation of Crimea in 2014 succeeded in fundamentally altering the European security thinking perception of the Black Sea as a peripheral space for its security. It was only with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that the Black Sea's centrality to European security became unmistakably clear.

The ongoing war in Ukraine, disruptions to grain exports, Ukrainian refugee flows into Europe, Russian incursions into the airspace over EU and NATO member states, and disruption of northern supply routes, among other factors, have further crystallized the Black Sea's importance and strategic relevance for European security. This is reflected, among others, in the first ever reference to the Black Sea region as the region of strategic importance for NATO in the Alliance's [2022 Strategic Concept](#), in the adoption of the [Black Sea Strategy](#) by

the European Union in 2025 and in the [South Caucasus visit](#) by U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance on February 9-11, 2026.

For decades, Georgia used to maintain special relations with important Western actors in the region- the United States, NATO, and the European Union. It was a strategic partner of the United States and an aspirant and Enhanced Opportunities partner for NATO. In fact, the region's and Georgia's strategic relevance first increased in the beginning of 2000s, when an agreement on the host nation support to and [transit](#) of NATO forces and NATO personnel was signed following the U.S.-led, and later NATO-led, troop operations in Afghanistan. Georgia also used to be a leader within the Associated Trio format with the European Union.

However, this has changed in recent years. The Western partners [grow](#) increasingly [concerned](#) with what they perceive as Georgia's gradual realignment of its foreign policy, moving [closer to Russia](#) and [Iran](#) and concluding a [strategic partnership](#) with China in 2023. In 2024, the United States suspended the U.S.-Georgia strategic partnership. Relations with the EU and NATO are at an all-time low. In parallel, according to multiple reports by international and local watchdogs, Georgian domestic politics have shifted toward consolidated [authoritarianism](#).

On March 12, the OSCE Moscow mechanism [report](#) - a human rights dimension tool for monitoring member states' human rights and democracy commitments- noted "marked democratic backsliding" in Georgia since spring 2024, recommending immediate release of "all prisoners held for political reasons" and repeal of a series of restrictive laws, among others. One of the recommendations of the report states that "States Parties to the Rome Statute may consider referral of the situation in Georgia to the International Criminal Court, taking into account the growing number of examples of political persecution, torture and other inhumane acts."

Georgia's position today is paradoxical. Geographically, it remains at the heart of the Black Sea-South Caucasus nexus. However, politically, its role is uncertain and vague. Geo-strategically, it can be argued, that it is diminishing: Georgian high-level representatives are [absent](#) from many high-profile international forums and discussions. Bilateral relations with traditional partners have [faltered](#), and Georgia is the subject of increasing criticism. Despite presenting itself as a committed Euro-Atlantic partner and a long-standing contributor to regional stability, Georgia's recent foreign policy choices and domestic political trends have complicated its relations with Western partners at a time when strategic clarity is vital.

As the Black Sea assumes greater significance and as the new global security architecture is being shaped, Georgia's position raises fundamental questions: Will it function primarily as an economic transit space, valued for connectivity but peripheral to strategic decision-

making, or can it emerge as part of a broader democratic Black Sea area, contributing to regional security and resilience? The answer will depend on both external dynamics and Georgia's own political trajectory. This paper examines Georgia's relations with the **European Union, NATO,** and the **United States** in this evolving context.

Georgia's Transit Role

The evolving strategic environment has revived discussions about alternative east–west corridors through the South Caucasus, complementing or bypassing traditional Black Sea routes. For Georgia, this presents opportunity to use its geographical location to further promote its role as a connecting hub between Europe and Asia. Its ports, rail infrastructure, and existing energy corridors remain central to the Middle Corridor, connecting Europe with Central Asia while avoiding Russian territory. Turkey's control of maritime approaches and China's Belt and Road engagement further highlight the corridor's broader geopolitical relevance.

While renewed Western interest in regional connectivity could reinforce Georgia's transit role, it also exposes the limits of this function. Transit routes are substitutable, and if confidence in Georgia's political alignment weakens further, alternative routes through Armenia or Azerbaijan, or hybrid maritime–overland corridors, may gain preference. Such, as for example - [Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity](#), a US brokered infrastructure and economic project, which was [agreed on](#) between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Washington last year. This route provides an alternative to Russian-controlled transit pathways and aligns with the Middle Corridor, a transportation network that links Europe to Central Asia and China via the Caspian Sea. The agreement was sealed during the [visit](#) of the U.S. Vice-President J.D. Vance to the region's two capitals – Baku and Yerevan on February 9-11. The conspicuous omission of Tbilisi from the visit of the U.S. Vice President, unimaginable several years ago, was [assessed](#) as another sign of deteriorated relations between the U.S. and Georgia.

Georgia's Structural Importance — and Strategic Drift Away from the West

Georgia's relevance in the Black Sea region stems from its geographic location, which links the Black Sea to the South Caucasus and the Caspian Basin. This is evident through projects such as the South Caucasus Gas Pipeline (SCP), which brings gas from the Caspian Sea to Turkey via Georgia, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline. Additionally, Georgia's infrastructure underpins the east-west transport and energy corridors. Georgia is central to the [Middle Corridor](#), alternative to Russian-controlled transit pathways and connecting Europe and Asia via Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea, with Turkey playing a key role in trade and transit links and maritime connectivity.

The corridor has attracted Chinese interest as part of its Belt and Road strategy, and further highlights Georgia's potential relevance to broader Eurasian trade and transit networks.

These structural features have long made Georgia an essential element of regional connectivity and security planning. This role of Georgia has on many instances been advertised and [underlined](#) by the Georgian authorities. It would have received additional serious boost had Georgian government years ago realized the [Anaklia](#) deep sea project, which has effectively [stalled](#), its past turbulent and its future uncertain.

Still, one would think the stars have finally aligned for Georgia to use its geographic location to the fullest to the best interest of its nation and national interest. But what has apparently [changed](#) is Georgia's political orientation. The growing gap between Georgia's formal strategic declarations and actual foreign and security policies can no longer be described merely as ambiguity. It now is being assessed as reflective of a substantive shift away from Western alignment toward tacit accommodation with Russia, even as official rhetoric continues to affirm Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

The European Union: Integration Interrupted

Despite the formal EU candidate status granted to Georgia in 2023, relations with the EU are strained, marked by sustained political tensions and declining trust. Although integration into the EU remains a constitutional objective, Georgian Dream government has [suspended](#) the EU membership negotiations until 2028, which sparked popular protests in Tbilisi and across Georgian diasporas that continue to this day.

The U-turn occurred amid the Union's mounting [concerns](#) about [democratic backsliding](#) [human rights violations](#), documented [repression](#), political persecutions, the [adoption](#) of [laws](#) assessed as [repressive](#) by international and local watchdogs, a pro-Russian stance, and [anti-EU rhetoric](#) from government officials. A [vivid manifestation](#) of Georgia's drift from the EU is the sharp [decline](#) in its [alignment](#) with EU Common Security and Defense Policy statements [over the years](#), compared with other EU candidates in particular Moldova and Ukraine.

While Moldova and Ukraine advance in accession negotiations and join EU's [free roaming](#) and [Single Europe Payments Area](#) (SEPA), Georgian officials are being sanctioned by EU member states. Georgia's diplomatic passport holders are now excluded from the Schengen visa-free regime and EU [withdrew](#) millions of direct assistance citing democratic backslide. No high-level political dialogue is taking place. Moreover, the EU now considers Georgia an [EU candidate "in name only."](#) On top of that, the UK joined the trend and, in a separate move, [sanctioned](#) Georgian officials and, as recently as February 24, 2026 [sanctioned](#) Georgia's two major pro-government TV channels, Imedi TV and PosTV citing spreading "deliberately

misleading information” by these channels and [identifying](#) them as “involved in Russian disinformation.” The sanctions include asset freezes, trust services sanctions and director disqualification sanctions.

In March 2026, Georgia’s Kulevi oil terminal and port narrowly [escaped](#) EU sanctions for its alleged involvement in avoiding sanctions against Russia. The EU reassessed its initial position and eventually removed Kulevi port from the 20th package of sanctions, but only after the Georgian authorities committed not to allow EU-sanctioned vessels to enter Georgian ports. In his [letter](#) to Georgian Dream Foreign Minister Maka Botchorishvili, EU Sanctions Envoy David O’Sullivan promised that the EU would “monitor closely” the circumvention of EU sanctions through Georgia.

The United States: A Strategic Partnership in Suspension

Georgia–US relations are at all-times low. In 2024 the US suspended the strategic partnership with Georgia and [indefinitely paused](#) the U.S.-Georgian Noble Partner military exercise “due to the Georgian government’s false accusations against the United States and other western entities of pressuring Georgia to open a second front against Russia to alleviate pressure on Ukraine, and of participating in two coup attempts against the ruling party.” The same year Secretary of State Anthony Blinken announced a [comprehensive review](#) of bilateral relations.

In 2025 the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee passed the [MEGOBARI](#) Act (the abbreviation pointedly means “friend” in Georgia) – a bipartisan bill reaffirming support for the Georgian people and its Euro-Atlantic integration. The bill also includes provisions for sanctions against the officials of the Georgian government. Since then, the bill has been delayed in the U.S. Senate but remains a proverbial sword of Damocles for the Georgian authorities. Washington has also [frozen](#) direct assistance to the Georgian government and sanctioned [officials](#) implicated in corruption or in [fostering](#) Russian malign influence. Among the [sanctioned](#) individuals is the honorary chair of the Georgian Dream party Bidzina Ivanishvili. Meanwhile, high-level meetings have stalled, and there has been no US ambassador in Tbilisi for almost a year. The Georgian Dream government has repeatedly [expressed](#) willingness to start relations from a “[blank slate](#)”, but expectations under the new, Donald Trump administration have not materialized. This pause reflects declining US confidence in Georgia’s strategic reliability.

NATO: Aspirations on Hold

Georgia has been a NATO aspirant country since 2011. Through interoperability, substantial contributions to NATO missions (Georgia was the largest per-capita and one of the largest overall contributors in [Resolute Support Mission](#) in Afghanistan), and active participation in

political dialogue, it positioned itself as one of the Alliance's most advanced partners of the organization.

However, external and internal factors have shifted this trajectory. The war in Ukraine has reshaped NATO's priorities, emphasizing immediate deterrence and defense along the Alliance's eastern flank. Internal debates within NATO and shifting political signals from key allies, including the United States, have narrowed the space for enlargement discussions.

And internally, democratic backsliding, dubious position on Ukraine and rapprochement with Russia have [weakened](#) Georgia's credibility.

These trends are reflected in Georgia's engagement with NATO on Black Sea security. While it has participated in Black Sea security dialogue since 2016 and sought to present itself as a contributor to regional stability, its visibility has declined in recent years. This happens against the background of the adoption in 2022 of NATO's latest [Strategic Concept](#) which, for the first time refers to the Black Sea region as "the region of strategic importance for the Alliance" and expresses commitment to bolstering their capabilities and boosting their resilience. In addition to NATO Parliamentary Assembly's (PA) Standing Committee's [suspension](#) of meetings of the Georgia-NATO Interparliamentary Council (GNIC) due to concerns over democratic backsliding, the disappearing clout and visibility of Georgia is evident from the deteriorating language on Georgia in the final documents of the recent NATO Summits. For instance, the 2024 Washington NATO Summit [final document](#) did not any more mention Georgia in the context of Black Sea security and omitted the reference to 2008 Bucharest Summit decision that Georgia would become a NATO member. The commitment is also absent from the NATO Secretary General's 2024 [Annual Report](#). Georgia, which used to be represented at the highest level at NATO Summits, was now merely represented at the ministerial level at 2022 and 2024 Summits of the Alliance.

The Russian Accommodation Fallacy

Georgia's realignment with Russia has not been publicly acknowledged by the Georgian Dream government or strategically debated. Instead, the government seeks to maintain the appearance of continuity of pro-Western path, while adjusting policy substance. GD's ideological alignment with Russia includes adopting laws similar to Russian legislation and promoting anti-Western narratives. Meanwhile, Georgia has over the years become more [dependent](#) on Russian [hydrocarbons](#) and [trade](#), and allowed hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens into Georgia.

Georgia's total bilateral [trade](#) with Russia grew from approximately \$1.63 billion in 2021 to \$2.53 billion in 2024. In 2023 Russia and Georgia [resumed](#) direct flights, Russia cancelled visas for Georgians, later [expanding the visa-free regime](#) for labor migrants as well. Russia

also and allocated quotas for Georgian students to study in Russian universities. Russian authorities do not shy away from [praising](#) the “pragmatic” [policy](#) of the current Georgian government and [indicate](#) that they would be open to restoring diplomatic relations.

The ambiguity of Georgian foreign policy has generated confusion among international partners and eroded confidence in Georgia’s long-term trajectory. In an increasingly polarized regional order, such an approach carries significant risks, especially considering the turbulence in the neighborhood, particularly the new flares of violence in Iran. Aligning with a [declining power](#) that challenges the sovereignty of its neighbors offers neither protection nor autonomy, particularly given Georgia’s turbulent history with Russia. Georgia needs friends and allies. By distancing itself from the West at a moment when anchoring within democratic alliances is critical, Georgia risks strategic isolation. Importantly, the internal authoritarian consolidation is closely linked to the foreign policy vector. A foreign policy oriented toward accommodation with Russia rather than alignment with the West and Georgia’s traditional Western partners tends to reinforce centralized governance, weaken democratic institutions, and normalize restrictions on political space. Over time, this trajectory risks economic stagnation, corruption, declining education standards, and international irrelevance.

In the changing Black Sea order, shaped by confrontation, realignment, and reassertion of political blocs, states that fail to anchor themselves decisively risk becoming objects rather than subjects of regional order.

Two Paths for Georgia in the Emerging Black Sea Order

Russia’s war against Ukraine has turned the Black Sea region into a contested frontier where security, political alignment, and economic connectivity are increasingly intertwined. For states on the Black Sea’s eastern edge, political choice is decisive. And for Georgia, this transformation coincides with heightened vulnerability. The country remains important as a link between Europe and the South Caucasus, yet its capacity to shape regional outcomes has diminished. This gap reflects deliberate distancing from Western partners and tacit accommodation with Russia, even as official rhetoric affirms Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Georgia faces two fundamentally different paths. The **first path** positions the country primarily as an economic and technical transit corridor. Its relevance derives from geography, infrastructure, and logistical utility, while security and political alignment are treated as secondary or deferred. Under this model, ports, railways, and energy routes constitute the basis for engagement with external partners, while for the Western partners, in particular, domestic political governance becomes subordinate to functional connectivity.

The consequences extend beyond symbolism. In a Black Sea region increasingly organized around political blocs, states that fail to anchor themselves decisively risk being reduced to roles defined by others. For Georgia, this entails a future as a technically useful but politically marginal space. Transit routes are inherently replaceable; if Georgia's relations with the West erode alternative corridors through Armenia and Azerbaijan or hybrid configurations could supplant its position.

Without firm political alignment or security partnerships with the West, Georgia would remain exposed to pressure from Russia, whose leverage over trade, occupied territories, and security dynamics would remain decisive. Politically, external accommodation reinforces internal centralization, erodes democratic institutions, and narrows political pluralism. Economically, this trajectory is likely to produce uneven development, corruption, and extractive patterns. Georgia would remain connected but not integrated, open to transit but closed politically. Over time, Western actors would likely prioritize partners with clearer alignment, further reducing Georgia's strategic relevance.

The second path situates Georgia as a democratic security partner within a broader Western-oriented Black Sea space. This model requires clear political alignment, institutional resilience, and sustained engagement with Euro-Atlantic structures. **Georgia's value lies not only in geography but in political reliability, regulatory compatibility, and contribution to regional stability.** Cooperation with the European Union and NATO extends beyond technical projects to encompass security dialogue, resilience, and coordinated responses to regional threats. Georgia's transit function becomes a strategic asset rather than a vulnerability, embedded within trusted political relationships and protected by shared interests. While this path entails short-term costs, including political friction with Russia and greater governance demands, it offers long-term gains in autonomy, credibility, and security. And not only for Georgia, but for EU, NATO and the U.S. as well, which gains from Georgia's reversal to democratic and Euro-Atlantic path and its political autonomy.

Crucially, the choice to be made is inseparable from domestic political trajectory. Democratic governance, institutional resilience, and predictability underpin Georgia's perception as a partner rather than a functional corridor. In the context of an increasingly polarized Black Sea, this distinction is decisive. The region's future will be shaped by states willing to define themselves politically, not merely position themselves geographically. Georgia's place in this emerging order is still undecided, but time is limited.

The following steps are essential for Georgia to maintain strategic relevance, protect sovereignty, and avoid its marginalization in a Black Sea region increasingly shaped by political blocs and contested influence.

Policy recommendations:

- 1. Clarify strategic orientation.** Georgia should reaffirm its commitment to Euro-Atlantic institutions and return to the constitutional objectives of its foreign and security policy. This will ensure that its foreign policy and diplomatic actions consistently reflect alignment with the EU, NATO, and the United States.
- 2. Return to democratic governance:** revoking restrictive legislation, stopping repression, safeguarding political pluralism, conducting free and fair elections, and upholding the rule of law are essential to restoring credibility and securing long-term stability. Fulfilling the European Commission's nine priorities, as a first step, would demonstrate a commitment to change.
- 3. Optimize Transit and Connectivity:** through aligning with the traditional Western partners, Georgia should leverage its position along the Middle Corridor by integrating regional investments into a framework that enhances political influence rather than merely functioning as a logistical route. Realizing the Anaklia deep-sea port project and enhancing transit infrastructure should be priorities.
- 4. Despite the limitations posed by Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, Georgia should actively participate in the Black Sea security dialogue and NATO-led cooperation.** This will ensure that Georgia's perspective is considered in the development of regional defense and resilience strategies.
- 5. Georgia's Western partners should use incentives, both positive and negative, more strategically and effectively to convince the Georgian authorities to follow through with the democratic agenda and return to its constitutional foreign policy path, in line with the aspirations of most of the Georgian population.**