

# **Black Sea Security: Priorities for the U.S. Georgia Partnership Under President Biden**

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## About the author

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# Black Sea Security: Priorities for the U.S. Georgia Partnership Under President Biden

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## Shifting security environment in the Black Sea region

Situated at an East-West and North-South crossroads, the Black Sea region represents a unique geographic area where Russia, Europe, and the Middle East come together, while serving as a link between the Caspian, Aegean, and Mediterranean basins.

The region has also become a battleground of geopolitical confrontation and clashing interests between Russia and the West. Russia's occupation of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region (so-called South Ossetia) in 2008, annexation of Crimea in 2014 and ongoing military aggression in Eastern Ukraine, modernization of its Black Sea Fleet, and increased militarization including attempts to transform the Black Sea into an Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) zone,<sup>1</sup> all clearly indicate the Kremlin's willingness to turn the Black Sea into its lake.

The second Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020 further deteriorated Black Sea security and led to increased militarization of the region. Military escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan has shown that frozen conflicts can defrost quickly, making the security environment in the South Caucasus even more fragile. The conflict also demonstrated Russia's intentions to become a dominant power in the region. Moscow's stationing of troops in Nagorno-Karabakh increases the security threat for the littoral states while hindering prospects of peacebuilding in the South Caucasus.

Instability in the South Caucasus has a direct impact on Black Sea security due to the region's strategic importance for connectivity, trade, security, economic, and energy projects, compounded by existing ideological confrontation between Russia and the West. The second Nagorno-Karabakh war has direct military and security implications for Georgia, firstly due to Moscow's growing political influence and military presence in the region and secondly due to the potential economic implications of the conflict, reducing the flow of foreign direct investment into the region.

Greater U.S. presence in the South Caucasus region would prevent Russia, Iran, and China from exercising further leverage in the Black Sea region. It would also allow Georgia to succeed in its path to democratization and membership into European and Euro-Atlantic structures, while deterring further Russian aggression on Georgian soil. This policy paper identifies a set of key

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<sup>1</sup> Dan McCormick, "Allied A2AD in the Black Sea," Middle East Institute, January 19, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/allied-a2ad-black-sea>.

recommendations for increased political, economic, and security cooperation between the U.S. and Georgia. Implementing these recommendations would strengthen the resilience and security of Georgia and the Black Sea in the face of continued Russian aggression.

### **Georgia's strategic importance for the United States**

The Black Sea has become increasingly important for Western interests, not least because of the several energy pipelines that traverse the region. These pipelines make the region a key contributor to global energy security, and one which requires deeper Western engagement. Georgia in particular is a critical corridor for East-West trade and for transporting oil and gas from Azerbaijan to Turkey and on to international markets, while bypassing Russia. Georgia has proved its geostrategic importance many times, having acted as a transit route for oil and gas, and for goods and NATO troops to Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup>

The second Nagorno-Karabakh war put Georgia in a difficult position. Tbilisi has long prided itself as a cradle of democracy in the South Caucasus and a committed Western ally. In light of Russia's ongoing occupation of Georgian territories and its "borderization" policy, as well as Moscow's increased posture in the wider region, Georgia faces a unique set of complex threats and challenges. These threats and challenges require an adequate response from Tbilisi and enhanced cooperation with Washington.

Georgia – the most pro-active country in the region in terms of building democratic institutions – signed the U.S. Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership with the United States more than a decade ago.<sup>3</sup> Since then, it has remained determined and consistent in its foreign policy aspirations. Georgia is also the most pro-Western country in the region, with a recent opinion poll conducted by the National Democratic Institute suggesting 76 percent of Georgians are in favor of NATO membership.<sup>4</sup> The choice of the Georgian people to remain committed to Western values causes extreme frustration within the Kremlin, reflected in its continuous aggression against Tbilisi. Turning a blind eye to heightened tensions and increased Russian military presence in the region – which directly threatens Georgia's sovereignty – encourages the Kremlin to further pursue its aggressive policies and may eventually lead to even more devastating consequences.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke Coffey, "Georgia should not fear new transit routes in the South Caucasus," Middle East Institute, March 2, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/georgia-should-not-fear-new-transit-routes-south-caucasus>.

<sup>3</sup> "U.S. Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership," U.S. Embassy in Georgia, accessed June 2021, <https://ge.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/u-s-georgia-charter-strategic-partnership/>.

<sup>4</sup> "NDI poll: 76% of Georgian respondents support EU membership, and 69% support NATO membership," JAM News, July 28, 2021, <https://jam-news.net/ndi-poll-76-of-georgian-respondents-support-eu-membership-and-69-support-nato-membership/>.

Georgia remains the most reliable U.S. ally in the region. Since regaining its independence in 1991, the U.S. has invested substantial resources in building Georgia's economy, democratic institutions, and resilience. Since the Russia-Georgia war in 2008, the U.S. has also provided Tbilisi with increasing military assistance – between 2010 and 2019, Washington granted approximately \$265 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) assistance to Georgia.<sup>5</sup> According to a Congressional Research Service Report, between 1992 and 2020, Georgia received \$4,348,400,000 in financial aid from the U.S.<sup>6</sup>

History shows that the Georgia-U.S. relationship stands above party politics with Tbilisi enjoying bipartisan congressional support for many years. Subsequent U.S. administrations have consistently seen Georgia as an ally and loyal partner, as demonstrated by ongoing U.S. assistance and support for Georgia's NATO membership path. Yet, the Trump Administration showed little vision and interest toward the Black Sea region. This was compounded by a lack of leadership in dealing with the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, which allowed Russia and Turkey to mediate the conflict without Western involvement, leading to Russia increasing its presence in the region.

Following the Nagorno-Karabakh war, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan proposed the idea of a six-country regional cooperation platform to create new opportunities for regional cooperation in the Caucasus.<sup>7</sup> The idea envisages a platform that would bring Turkey, Russia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Georgia, and Armenia together. If completed, the platform would accelerate the process of weakening Western interests in the region that would serve as a strategic advantage for the Kremlin. The initiative is a reminder for Washington that it is crucial for the U.S. to develop a Black Sea strategy and improve its presence in the region in order to protect its allies and vital regional interests.

Despite a myriad of complex domestic and foreign policy challenges already facing President Joe Biden, strengthening support for America's allies, including in the South Caucasus and the Black Sea region, will be crucial if he is to remain committed to America's international leadership. Encouragingly, Biden and his team, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken, see NATO as an important tool for countering Russian aggression and have pledged to repair transatlantic relationships.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "Georgia: Background and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service, June 10, 2021, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45307.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> "Turkey can open border if Armenia takes steps for peace – Erdogan," Reuters, December 10, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/armenia-azerbaijan-turkey/turkey-can-open-border-if-armenia-takes-steps-for-peace-erdogan-idUKA4N2FR01B?edition-redirect=uk>.

<sup>8</sup> Todd Prince, "How Will Biden Change U.S. Policy On Russia, Iran?," RadioFreeEurope, November 7, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/what-could-us-foreign-policy-look-like-under-biden/30935677.html>.

## Enhanced cooperation: How can U.S. support make Georgia more secure?

In recent years, the Georgian government has continuously stressed increasing Georgia's posture in the Black Sea.<sup>9</sup> This would open a new window of opportunity for Tbilisi to build its resilience, increase its cooperation with littoral states and the West and most importantly, emerge from the narrow South Caucasus paradigm. Yet, alongside Georgia's commitments to becoming a proactive contributor to Black Sea security – and given the conflicting interests in the Black Sea region and complex security environment – Georgia would require enhanced support from the West to achieve its political, security, and economic goals.

### Political Dimension

Since regaining its independence, Georgia has undergone a challenging path toward democratization while building trust with its Western allies, particularly Washington. Despite regional and domestic challenges, Georgia has made important progress toward building a democratic society and reducing corruption and has proved worthy of European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Georgia has also faced major turbulence in domestic politics, as seen with extreme political polarization that could endanger Tbilisi's smooth progress toward joining the European and Euro-Atlantic community.

Despite being recognized as competitive by the OSCE, Georgian opposition parties disputed the results of 2020 parliamentary elections and refused to take up their seats in parliament until the EU-mediated "Charles Michel Agreement" was signed.<sup>10</sup><sup>11</sup><sup>12</sup> The situation worsened following the arrest of United National Movement (UNM) party chairman Nika Melia for violating bail conditions following his role in the 2019 attack on Georgia's parliament.<sup>13</sup> Melia's arrest was preceded by the resignation of Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia over his disagreement with plans to arrest Melia and in bid to avoid further escalation of political tensions.<sup>14</sup> Mediation efforts led by the U.S. and the EU

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<sup>9</sup> "Giorgi Gakharia talks about Georgia's role in Black Sea region, occupation, and regional security challenges at discussion organized by leading British think tank RUSI," Government of Georgia, accessed October 14, 2021, [http://gov.ge/print.php?gg=1&sec\\_id=547&info\\_id=77474&lang\\_id=ENG](http://gov.ge/print.php?gg=1&sec_id=547&info_id=77474&lang_id=ENG).

<sup>10</sup> "Georgia, Parliamentary Elections, 31 October: Final Report," Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe, March 5, 2020, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/480500>.

<sup>11</sup> "Georgia opposition boycott election runoffs," The Economic Times, November 21, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/georgia-opposition-boycott-election-runoffs/articleshow/79336713.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>12</sup> "Remarks by President Charles Michel at the signing ceremony of the Georgia agreement with President of Georgia Salome Zourabichvili," European Council, April 19, 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/04/19/remarks-by-president-charles-michel-at-the-signing-ceremony-of-the-georgia-agreement-with-president-of-georgia-salome-zourabichvili/>.

<sup>13</sup> "Police Storm UNM Office, Detain Nika Melia," Civil.ge, February 23, 2021, <https://civil.ge/archives/400099>.

<sup>14</sup> "Georgia's prime minister resigns, opposition calls for early election," Reuters, February 18, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-politics-minister-idUSKBN2AI0X5>.

concluded on April 19 with a roadmap for Georgia's continued democratic transformation while decreasing political polarization.

**Supporting democratic development:** Domestic turbulence and extreme political polarization are not unusual for the region. But despite existing challenges, European and Euro-Atlantic integration remains the priority for the Georgian people. Strong engagement from U.S. Ambassador to Georgia Her Excellency Kelly Degnan during negotiations between the governing Georgian Dream party and opposition parties once again proves the U.S. is determined to keep Georgia stable and firmly on a democratic path.

Deepening polarization only serves Russian aims to destabilize political processes in Georgia. Thus, active support and encouragement from the Biden Administration for Georgia's economic, judicial, political, security, and democratic reforms to build stronger institutions will remain crucial for Georgia's future. Demonstrable progress in these areas will enhance Tbilisi's chances of joining NATO and the EU. By helping Georgian institutions to become stronger, all while supporting Tbilisi in countering Russia's malign activities like disinformation and cyber-attacks, U.S. influence in the region will strengthen.

**Active and ongoing presence:** For the Biden Administration to reclaim U.S. leadership in the region, on-the-ground presence, including high-level visits to Georgia, is important. It is crucial to reaffirm American presence in the region, recognize the Black Sea as a high priority region for U.S. foreign policy, and protect its allies and interests. The November 2020 visit of former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Tbilisi laid a path for the Biden Administration to build on.

**NATO membership:** Georgia has proved its commitment to NATO membership through a deep and comprehensive partnership with the Alliance. With its active participation in NATO-led operations and missions, Tbilisi is a reliable security and political partner of the West in ensuring global peace and security. Despite this progress, the prospect of Georgia joining the Alliance seems distant and is long overdue. Encouragingly, Secretary Blinken has reiterated that NATO's door should be open for Georgia if Tbilisi meets the membership requirements.<sup>15</sup> The U.S. must work with NATO Allies in pushing for Georgia's membership. Doing so will serve as a powerful deterrence against Russian aggression and make the Black Sea less vulnerable to the Kremlin's malign activities.

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<sup>15</sup> "At Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing, Portman Presses Secretary Blinken on Nord Stream II, U.S. Support for a NATO Membership Action Plan for Ukraine and Georgia," Rob Portman, June 8, 2021, <https://www.portman.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/senate-foreign-relations-committee-hearing-portman-presses-secretary>

**Georgia's return to the international agenda:** In recent years, Russian occupation of Georgian territories has lacked international awareness, with attention diverted toward Ukraine (a topic also of utmost importance). Yet, given Russia's ongoing occupation and aggressive disinformation campaigns targeting Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, Georgia must be placed back on the international agenda. During the Biden-Putin summit in Geneva in June, a myriad of security issues, including the situation in Ukraine, were discussed. While President Biden expressed the U.S.'s unwavering support for Kyiv, Georgia was not mentioned at all. If Georgia's security challenges keep fading from high-level political discussions, the Kremlin will be allowed to proceed with its "borderization." This will set a dangerous precedent for further Russian aggression, not only in Georgia, but across the region.

### Security Dimension

Russia's occupation of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region, its military presence in the occupied territories of Georgia, and an ongoing "borderization policy" which implies a creeping occupation of Georgian territories, all represent major national security challenges for Georgia.<sup>16</sup> Russian occupying forces continue to illegally detain Georgian citizens. At the same time, Russia has violated its international obligations and international law and as recently asserted by the ECHR ruling, continues to maintain effective control over Georgian territories while denying access to international monitoring missions such as the EU Monitoring Mission.<sup>17</sup> These security threats not only have implications for Georgia, but also implications for the stability and security of the Black Sea region.

**Developing a Black Sea strategy:** In line with President Biden's determination to reaffirm America's global leadership and work with allies around the world, the U.S. must develop a much-needed Black Sea strategy. This would outline the strategic vision of the current administration toward the Black Sea. At the same time, Georgia must deepen its cooperation with the U.S., both bilaterally and within the Black Sea security framework. This would include the U.S. engaging more closely with Georgia through new initiatives in maritime security and trade and economy.

**Boosting U.S. naval presence:** Russia has become increasingly proactive in militarizing the region. While the U.S. Navy and NATO have significantly increased their presence, Russia still sees the Black Sea as its maritime domain of strategic importance. Thus, the U.S. must

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<sup>16</sup> "Russia's 'Silent' Occupation and Georgia Territorial Integrity," RUSI, April 18, 2019, <https://rusi.org/commentary/russia-s-'silent'-occupation-and-georgia-s-territorial-integrity>.

<sup>17</sup> "European Court Verdict into Georgia vs. Russia Case over 2008 War," civil.ge, January 21, 2021, <https://civil.ge/archives/392226>.



strengthen its naval presence without violating the Montreux Convention, while supporting Georgia's and Ukraine's naval capabilities and infrastructure.

**Providing equipment:** An important milestone of the U.S.-Georgia partnership under the Trump Administration was to allow Tbilisi to purchase Javelin missiles.<sup>18</sup> The Biden Administration should divert from President Obama's unofficial policy of banning the provision of military equipment to Georgia and Ukraine, while continuing to help build the resilience and deterrence capabilities of both countries.

**Joint exercises:** Georgia already participates in joint military trainings and exercises, which have proved valuable in enhancing the interoperability of Georgia's defense forces with NATO standards. Increasing Georgia's participation in naval trainings and joint military exercises will strengthen Georgia's defense capabilities and bring Tbilisi closer to NATO. Annual multilateral exercises such as 'Nobel Partner,' 'Agile Spirit,' and 'Sea Breeze' are strong examples of such cooperation.

**U.S. military base:** Russia's strengthened role in the region, undermines and weakens American influence in the Black Sea. With Georgia surrounded by Russian troops, regional stability is under threat. In response, the U.S. should increase rotational forces in the region. The U.S. should also consider increasing its military presence by potentially deploying more troops to Georgia. Increased military presence in Georgia would provide Washington with a strategic advantage because of Georgia's location. Furthermore, U.S. military presence in Georgia would serve as the most powerful deterrence against potential Russian aggression and its ongoing "borderization" policy. Increased U.S. presence would send a strong signal to Russia and, contrary to popular opinion, reduces the chances of military confrontation with Russia.

## Economic Dimension

The Black Sea is an important trading route connecting Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus to Western Europe and the Mediterranean. In recent years, the Black Sea has become a major source of interest for key players like the U.S., Russia, China, and Turkey. This growing interest is also linked to commercial and economic dimensions. Black Sea connectivity has therefore become an important priority in the region, particularly for the littoral states.

**Increased U.S. investment:** Georgia needs to attract more foreign investment and infrastructure development, particularly in the post-COVID era. Sustainable economic development is the key to ensuring stability in the region. Yet, the Kremlin sees the economic success of countries like Georgia and Ukraine as a threat to its own interests. The

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<sup>18</sup> "Georgia purchased all US anti-tank Javelin missiles required and they are in Georgia," Agenda.ge, April 4, 2019, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2019/942>.

U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) can play an integral role in boosting investment flow in Georgia. The DFC already supports and funds strategically important projects for Georgia, such as maritime and port infrastructure (including the PACE Terminal in Poti Port), and across the financial, energy, communications, healthcare, and tourism sectors. Encouraging further U.S. investment in Georgia at a time of increased uncertainty would weaken Russian and Chinese economic ambitions in the region and Georgia's dependency on such projects, further boosting the U.S.'s role as a major player.

**Free Trade Agreement:** The U.S. has in recent years discussed the prospects of establishing a Free Trade Agreement with Georgia. With its economic reforms and strong historic ties with the U.S., Tbilisi has proved itself worthy of being a free trade partner. A further boost in U.S. investment in the region would accelerate Georgia's economic development.

A free trade agreement would also make it easier for U.S. investors to support the Anaklia deep sea port project, which is of vital importance for Georgia. If completed, Anaklia will enhance Georgia's geo-strategic importance and role as a reliable transit route for the U.S. and the EU, while transforming Georgia into a trading and logistic hub. The port will give Georgia to direct access to large-scale shipping while boosting Georgia's economic prosperity increased economic activity.

## Conclusion

Over the years, relations between Tbilisi and Washington have developed into a strong strategic partnership. Yet, regional security challenges require the new U.S. administration to review its policy priorities with regard to the Black Sea and Georgia. While the Biden Administration faces an unprecedented set of domestic challenges, it is crucial to keep Georgia on a development path that would ultimately lead to Tbilisi's European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

As the West manages the threat of growing Russian influence and the Kremlin's malign activities, Georgia's history and experience as a constant target of Russian aggression and hybrid warfare is an invaluable asset for the U.S. and NATO. In order to deter further Russian military posture and aggression in the Black Sea region, the U.S. must increase its military presence while at the same time advocating for Georgia's continued democratization and European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

