

Top Five Priorities for the U.S.— Georgian Relationship in 2020

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Georgia, firmly committed to the transatlantic community and a dependable ally in Afghanistan and Iraq, is a tremendously important partner for the United States.

Fortunately, Georgia's future NATO membership and the possibility of a U.S.-Georgia free trade agreement are making progress.

In 2020, the U.S. should support free and fair elections, push for a free trade agreement, deepen the defense relationship, and support Georgia's NATO aspirations.

This year will be important for the U.S.–Georgian relationship. In October 2020, Georgia will hold its parliamentary elections. After a 2019 filled with street protests, these elections will likely be tumultuous. Other matters for 2020 include the fate of the Anaklia port project, a U.S.–Georgia free trade agreement (FTA), and Georgia's NATO aspirations.

In order to advance the U.S.–Georgian relationship in 2020, the U.S. should support free and fair parliamentary elections, push for a free trade agreement with Georgia, support Georgia's NATO aspirations, strengthen the bilateral defense relationship, and prod Georgia to find a new investor for the Anaklia port project.

An Important Partner

Georgia is tremendously important to the United States. For one, Georgia has proven to be a dependable

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ally in Afghanistan and Iraq. Over the years, it has stationed thousands of troops in support of both missions. Secondly, Georgia's location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia is extremely strategic. Running through Georgia are key oil and gas pipelines and rail lines, which are important to European security. These pipelines include the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline, the Baku–Supsa pipeline, and the coming Southern Gas Corridor transit, and the main rail line running through Georgia is the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway. Georgia also serves as an example for the Eurasia region in terms of its democratization efforts. It has remained committed to the transatlantic community for nearly 20 years, and it strongly values territorial integrity.¹

The Top Priorities

In order to maintain its commitment to Georgia, the U.S. needs to focus on the following top five priorities in 2020:

1. Support Free and Fair Parliamentary Elections in Georgia. Georgia will hold parliamentary elections in October 2020. Georgian politics have been in turmoil over the past year. Dozens of protests have occurred since June 2019. Subjects of the protests have included a Russian Member of Parliament occupying the Georgian parliamentary speaker's seat, Russia's illegal occupation of Georgia, LGBTQ rights, and the calling for resignations of several Georgian leaders.

Last June, after the protests began, the Georgian government, led by the Georgian Dream party, proposed to move the Georgian vote toward a fully proportional system of government from 2024 to 2020.² However, the Georgian government voted down this proposal in November.³ As a result, the vote was pushed to 2024 once again.

It is critical that the October 2020 elections are free and fair. Otherwise, Georgia could be faced with even more political instability. Georgia is a beacon of hope within the Eurasian region because its democratic endeavors drastically differ from its post-Soviet neighbors'. Protests are a part of Georgia's furthering democracy, but a more stable political system in 2020 would be beneficial. The U.S. should do everything in its power to support Georgia's democratic path—and free and fair elections for Georgia later this year.

2. Push for a Free Trade Agreement with Georgia. Georgia has made tremendous progress over the past decade in integrating further with the West and liberalizing its economy. From 1996, when The Heritage Foundation began publishing its annual *Index of Economic Freedom*, to 2019, Georgia jumped from the ranks of “economically repressed” to

“economically free.” It holds the record for most improved in rank, jumping from number 124 to 16 in only 13 years.⁴

The United States has discussed creating an FTA with Georgia for years. This year should be the time to create one. It would demonstrate tangible support for Georgia, which has contributed to the U.S. mission in Afghanistan for years.

Creating an FTA between Georgia and the U.S. would not be starting from scratch. A high-level trade dialogue already exists, in addition to a bilateral investment treaty⁵ and a bilateral trade and investment framework agreement.⁶ An FTA would only strengthen the already strong U.S.–Georgia trade relationship. Congress and the Trump Administration should make it a priority this year.

3. Support Georgia’s NATO Aspirations. Georgia was promised NATO membership at the Bucharest Summit in 2008. Later that year, Russian forces invaded Georgia. Russia continues to occupy 20 percent of Georgia’s territory in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region (South Ossetia). Georgia still has not received NATO membership, and this makes it more vulnerable to Russian aggression and the occupation.

Despite its lack of membership, however, Georgia remains one of NATO’s most valuable partners. The NATO–Georgia Commission, which was formed in September 2008, exists “as a forum for political consultations and oversees the practical cooperation between Georgia and NATO.”⁷ In addition, for the past 12 years, Georgia has submitted to NATO Allies an Annual National Programme to receive advice on various reform objectives. Likewise, NATO supports Georgia through the Substantial NATO–Georgia Package, which works to strengthen Georgia’s defense abilities and help with preparations for future membership.⁸

Because Georgia’s Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) regions are still under Russian occupation, NATO would need to be creative in granting Georgia membership. To do so, NATO could amend Article 6 of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty, which defines the specific territories that fall under Article 5 protection.⁹ This would temporarily exclude the Russian-occupied regions from Article 5 protection, but all of Georgia would join NATO. Until Russia relinquishes control of the occupied regions, only the Georgian-controlled regions would receive NATO’s security guarantee.

Georgia is a respected partner of NATO, and the U.S. should encourage its continued path toward NATO membership.

4. Strengthen the Bilateral Defense Relationship. The United States and Georgia have one of the strongest bilateral defense relationships in Eurasia. At the time of Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008, Georgia’s troop

numbers were just second to the United States' in Iraq. Furthermore, in 2012, when many NATO-member countries were beginning to withdraw from Afghanistan,¹⁰ Georgia *added* hundreds of troops.¹¹ Georgia also has suffered the most per capita loss in Afghanistan than any other nation.¹² In December 2019, five Georgian soldiers were injured after the terrorist attack at Bagram airfield. Today, Georgia keeps 870 troops stationed in Afghanistan. This makes it the largest non-NATO troop contributor to the NATO Resolute Support Mission.¹³

The U.S. values Georgia as a partner. Since the 2008 war, the U.S. has provided Georgia with more than \$750 million in military assistance.¹⁴ The Trump Administration, specifically, has been a strong advocate for Georgia; in 2017, the State Department approved a sale of over 400 Javelin anti-tank missiles¹⁵ and, in 2018, a sale of Stinger anti-aircraft missiles.¹⁶ In addition, the U.S. launched a three-year bilateral Georgia Defense Readiness Program in 2017, and U.S. Army advisors began advising Georgian Armed Forces personnel in 2018.¹⁷

The U.S. is on the right path in cooperating with Georgia and its military and should only continue to strengthen the bilateral defense relationship.

5. Prod Georgia to Find a New Investor for the Anaklia Port. The joint U.S.–Georgia Anaklia Port project was launched in 2017 to construct a new, deep-water seaport on the Black Sea. The project, costing \$2.5 billion, is aimed to handle up to 10,000 twenty-foot equivalent units.¹⁸

The port was scheduled to be completed by 2021, but progress has been halted. The Anaklia Development Consortium, which was granted rights to construct the port in October 2016, failed to meet multiple contract obligations by the end of 2019. Because of this, the Georgian government decided to back out of the project, but only until it finds a new investor.¹⁹

The U.S. should prod Georgia to find a new investor as soon as possible. Georgia needs the port. It would elicit much of the country's untapped logistic potential and make Georgia's name more prominent on the map. This would help Georgia economically and politically. The Anaklia port would also deepen the U.S.–Georgia bilateral relationship.

Congress and the Administration should encourage Georgia to find a new investor for the Anaklia port, re-enter the project, and persevere until its completion.

The Way Forward

Georgia will be faced with multiple challenges this year. The fate of the October parliamentary elections and the Anaklia Port project are uncertain.

However, they could be successful if the U.S. encourages Georgia onto the right path. Fortunately, the bilateral defense relationship, Georgia's future NATO membership, and the possibility of a U.S.–Georgia free trade agreement are already making progress.

The United States should continue strengthening its relationship with Georgia by making these five issues a top priority in 2020.

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Endnotes

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