Commentary No. 16
August 21, 2018

Georgia's NATO Ambitions: Ten Years after its War with Russia

Paul Hansbury

Summary

On the ten-year anniversary of its war with Russia, Georgia was hosting military exercises involving troops from – inter alia – nine NATO member states and Ukraine. Both Georgia and Ukraine's aspirations of NATO membership have been central to frictions between them and Russia, and in turn Russia's relations with NATO. Although the origins of the conflict in Ukraine after 2014 are less patently about NATO, the eruption of that conflict nonetheless showed how little convergence there has been between NATO members and Russia about European security following the short war of 2008.

Contents

1 NATO will enlarge...
2 ...But not to Georgia or Ukraine
3 Partnering up

The diplomatic 'reset' pursued by former US president Barack Obama in respect of Russia from 2009 hardly features in contemporary debates. Moreover, despite its ambitions, the South Caucasian republic still looks an unlikely candidate for imminent membership of the alliance.

NATO will enlarge...

As NATO sought to define itself in the post-Cold War era, its members' conviction that NATO was an instrument of a liberal world order went hand-in-hand with the belief that it was no longer an anti-Russian alliance and that Europe was no longer divided between east and west. The 1990 London Declaration committed the alliance to becoming 'an agent of change' on the continent. At the same time, the crux of the proclaimed liberal world order is that individual states are free to choose their alignments. NATO's shift to focusing on out-of-area operations has helped redefine its role and its 'open door' policy has encapsulated its purported liberalism.

The 'open door' policy has become entrenched in the minds of the current generation of policy-makers after Bill Clinton's US administration committed itself to enlargement. The reunification of Germany within NATO might be looked on as a precedent for enlargement into eastern Europe, but the controversy surrounding what was said about NATO during the Germany negotiations and the continued existence of the Warsaw Pact until mid-1991 suggest that case should be considered separately.

Clinton's first visit to Europe in January 1994 was crucial. Prior to this, according to Ronald Asmus, the US president had a policy for supporting reforms in Russia and no policy on NATO's future. Speaking in Prague, Clinton promised that 'the question is no longer whether NATO will take on new members but when and how.' Towards the end of his presidency, NATO's Madrid and Washington summits – which gave the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland membership - fixed the alliance's course.

> For NATO not to pursue its 'open door' policy through enlargement would amount to a recognition that little had changed since the Cold War and an ascendancy of unfashionable *realpolitik*.

...But not to Georgia or Ukraine

Russian policymakers, less ideologically driven, draw the opposite lesson from NATO's post-Cold War enlargement. They see 'aggressive expansion' and conclude that NATO has not changed since the Cold War, which justifies their own realism. Ahead of the 2008 war Russia repeatedly warned NATO members that it would not condone encroachment on its perceived sphere of influence. On the side-lines of NATO's Bucharest summit in April 2008, Vladimir Putin allegedly hinted that Russia was prepared to recognise Abkhazian and South Ossetian sovereignty – and annex Crimea and the Donbas from Ukraine – should NATO grant Membership Action Plans to Georgia and Ukraine. The subsequent invasion of Georgia showed that Russia was prepared to use force to retain its regional primacy, and that NATO member states lacked a genuine commitment to challenge Russia's claim of a sphere of influence.

More recent arguments made by politicians from NATO member states reaffirm this reluctance. First, diplomats routinely cite the territorial disputes both Georgia and now Ukraine have with Russia as an obstacle to membership.

> It's worth noting that for NATO to preclude membership on this basis is a matter of policy rather than a treaty stipulation and therefore a moot case.

Secondly, diplomats have occasionally advanced the argument that NATO could not protect Georgia in a war with Russia. This argument can be expected to grow in prominence if inter-alliance relations with Turkey strain further since military support during a war in Georgia would rely heavily on supply lines over Turkish soil. The possibility of Turkey leaving the alliance is far from unthinkable in the present climate.

Yet this is a slightly odd way of approaching the question of accession if a genuine 'open door' existed to all European states. Georgia could undoubtedly suffer tremendous losses in another war with Russia, but it would do so irrespective of NATO membership (the same applies to the Baltic states). Ultimately it is up to Georgia to determine how much threat it perceives from Russia and how best to protect its territory and interests. Were Georgia to join the alliance, the protection afforded through a credible commitment to extend Article 5 could be viewed as a matter of deterrence rather than collective defence.

Partnering up

NATO connects its 'open door' policy to Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty. This seems misleading. Article 10 does not really encourage aspirants that there is an open door, rather it reiterates that NATO members may choose to invite new states to join and that, like all NATO decisions, this requires unanimous agreement.

> The accession of Montenegro last year and the imminent accession of Macedonia shows that NATO can forge unanimity and will continue modest enlargement despite Russia's protests.

At the same time, neither Georgia nor Ukraine is likely to join any time soon – instead receiving support through 'partnership.' For some in the past, 'partnership' may well have implied eventual membership of the alliance, but the geographical reach of the 'Partnership for Peace' initiative means that the North Atlantic Treaty would need rewriting to encompass the whole of Eurasia for this to be a firm rule.

Despite persistently pressing its case for membership, Georgia has met mixed support from within the alliance. NATO frequently reiterates its support for Georgia rhetorically, as it did at the recent summit in Brussels, but, as the Russo-Georgian war a decade ago demonstrated, the alliance appears reluctant to take concrete steps or give specific promises that would make accession a reality.

The publication is supported by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (Germany)



Paul Hansbury
Associate Fellow, Minsk Dialogue Track-II Initiative