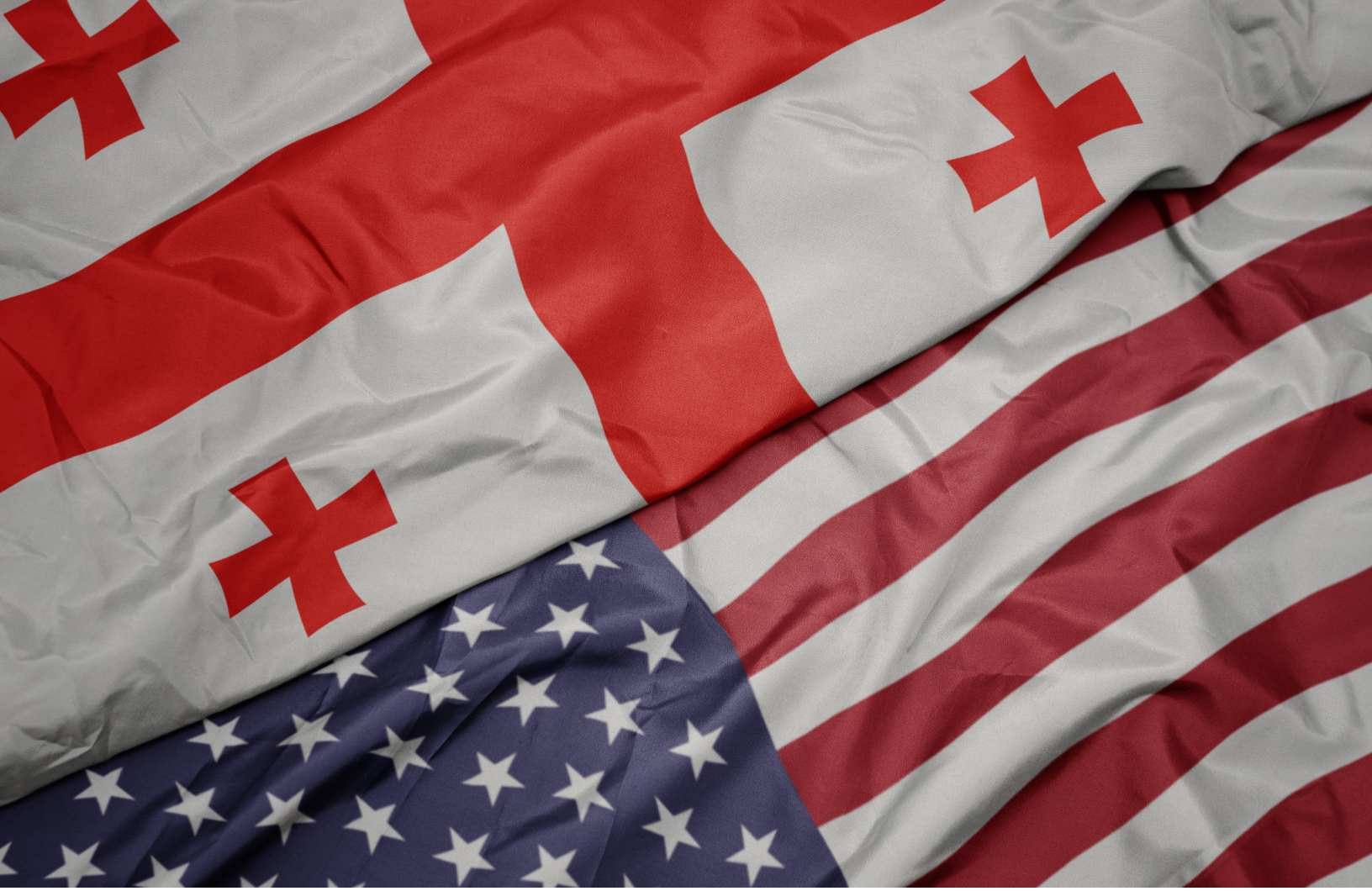


Policy Brief

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From Strategic Partnership to Conditional Engagement

The recalibration of US policy toward Georgia

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Summary

The relationship between the United States and Georgia has undergone a profound transformation in recent years. A longer historical perspective shows that, once a close strategic partnership built on shared geopolitical interests and support for Georgia's democratic development and Euro-Atlantic integration, the relationship is now characterized by political distrust, limited high-level engagement, and diverging priorities. This has happened since the Georgian Dream party—founded by the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, who made his fortune in Russia—came to power in 2012. Its increasingly authoritarian domestic policies and its confrontational stance toward Western partners have eroded the foundations of the relationship. At the same time, shifting US priorities in the South Caucasus and Georgia's expanding ties with Russia, China, and Iran have further complicated bilateral ties. However, the deterioration of the relationship has not led to US disengagement.

Since the start of the second Trump administration, the United States' approach to Georgia has become increasingly shaped by geopolitical competition with China, new security dynamics in the South Caucasus and the wider region, regional connectivity, and economic interests, with less emphasis on democratic considerations than in the past. Georgian Dream has sought to capitalize on the administration's transactional foreign policy to secure a reset in relations without making meaningful changes to its domestic political conduct. However, its efforts have largely fallen flat thus far. While Georgia retains strategic relevance for the United States, particularly in the context of competition with China and emerging regional connectivity initiatives, the administration has shown little willingness to restore the former partnership on Georgian Dream's terms.

The relationship's foreseeable future is likely to fall between a full restoration of the former strategic partnership and a complete breakdown. Two scenarios are possible. A transactional reset would involve limited concessions by the Georgian government in exchange for tangible steps toward normalization from Washington, including renewed high-level political contacts and expanded cooperation, without resolving deeper political disagreements. The more likely scenario is a limited, issue-specific relationship that preserves the current pattern of selective engagement in areas such as regional security, connectivity, and economic cooperation, while leaving the broader bilateral impasse unresolved.

Face with these scenarios, the United States should pursue conditional engagement with Georgia rather than isolation or unconditional normalization. It has an interest in maintaining cooperation where strategic priorities overlap, but a relationship based solely on geopolitical and economic considerations risks undermining its longer-term interests in the country and the South Caucasus. The rule of law in Georgia is essential for a reliable economic partnership and the commercial and connectivity projects involved. The absence of political pluralism and fair electoral competition could lead to domestic instability, with implications for the security situation. The administration should therefore use Georgian Dream's desire for improved relations to encourage meaningful political changes in the country, particularly ahead of the 2028 parliamentary elections, while maintaining targeted support for independent media, civil society, and educational exchanges. Continued bipartisan congressional engagement would help sustain US influence and demonstrate that Georgia remains relevant to Washington beyond immediate geopolitical calculations.

Introduction

In recent years, the relationship between the United States and Georgia changed significantly—from a close partnership based on shared strategic interests and alignment on democratic values to a situation of heightened tension, diminished political trust, and limited high-level diplomatic contacts. The relationship deteriorated not long after the Georgian Dream party came to power in 2012 as it gradually undid the country's democratization progress and took a more antagonistic approach to its Western partners who criticized the government for this. This did not eliminate Georgia's strategic relevance for the United States, but it fundamentally altered the terms on which the relationship plays out. At the same time, intensifying geopolitical competition with China as well new regional geopolitical and security dynamics altered Washington's priorities in the South Caucasus. US engagement with Georgia thus became increasingly shaped by strategic considerations, issue-specific cooperation, and conditionality.

Under the Trump administration's more transactional foreign policy, the United States views Georgia mostly through the prism of competition with China, economic prospects, and regional connectivity, with less attention to the state of the country's democracy than was the case in the past. Meanwhile, Georgian Dream has made so far unsuccessful efforts to secure a political reset with the administration.

Contrary to what some in both countries say, the United States has not fully disengaged from Georgia. Rather, the Trump administration is recalibrating US policy towards a problematic country at the intersection of some of its major strategic concerns. The risk in this is that engaging with Georgia only through the lens of geopolitics and economic ties, with normative issues downplayed, is not guaranteed to serve US long-term interests in the country and the South Caucasus.

This paper places the developments witnessed in recent years in the necessary historical context. It first provides an overview of the evolution of Georgia's foreign policy orientation since independence in 1991 and the trends in its relations with the United States and the West. It then looks at the country's democratic backsliding under Georgian Dream, which has played central role in the deterioration of these relations. The paper next reviews how the Georgian-US relationship underwent first a period of rising alignment and then one of growing tensions and weakening alignment. It then looks at the state of the relationship since the start of the second Trump administration. The paper concludes by considering two scenarios for the relationship in the next couple of years and what would be a desirable strategy of conditional engagement for the United States towards Georgia in this context.

Georgia's Evolving Foreign Policy Orientation

After gaining independence in 1991 and undergoing a civil war and secessionist conflicts, Georgia adopted a Western orientation under President Eduard Shevardnadze (1995–2003) and developed ties with the United States.[1] It promoted its geopolitical value through cooperation focused primarily on regional connectivity and security with projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Georgia Train and Equip Program of US military assistance. At NATO's Prague Summit in 2002, Shevardnadze set out the country's aspiration to join the alliance. Between 2003 and 2012, President Mikheil Saakashvili and his United National Movement (UNM) government played an important role in

forging a strong domestic consensus on Georgia's Western course while the scope and scale of ties with the United States increased considerably, with the addition of a commitment on both sides to furthering the country's democratization.[2] The government made EU and NATO membership, as well as close ties with Washington, the top foreign policy priorities. Security and defense cooperation consolidated, with Georgia not only a recipient of US training and assistance but also joining the US-led missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. The country advanced on the NATO membership path while forging stronger ties with the EU. At the Bucharest Summit in 2008, the alliance agreed that it could one day become a member but did not offer it a Membership Action Plan. Following Russia's short war against Georgia a few months later, the country continued on its Western course with deeper institutional cooperation with NATO, the United States, and the EU. In 2009, Washington and Tbilisi signed a Charter on Strategic Partnership that envisaged institutionally embedded cooperation across the domains of defense, democracy, the economy, and people-to-people ties.[3]

Georgian Dream came to power in 2012 claiming that it would deepen relations with the United States and the EU.[4] This was against the backdrop of the broad political consensus on the country's strategic orientation, with public support for EU and NATO membership having been consistently high for years. Euro-Atlantic integration was one of the few issues that transcended party politics. Georgian Dream presented itself not as offering an alternative to the Western orientation but as a better vehicle for achieving it. The partnership with the United States grew further, as this suited the party's domestic political agenda. During its first decade in government, Georgia continued participating in the US mission in Afghanistan, ramped up security cooperation with Washington, including through hosting annual military exercises, and upgraded cooperation with NATO after the 2014 Wales Summit. The relationship with the EU also expanded, with an Association Agreement signed in 2014.[5] The goals of joining the EU and NATO were enshrined in the constitution in 2017. At the same time, Georgian Dream initiated an economic opening to Russia while refusing to restore political ties.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was a turning point for Georgian Dream.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was a turning point for Georgian Dream. The party's leadership reckoned that fully embracing the West's approach to the war would bring critical political costs and threaten its hold on power, not least in the context of the political crisis in the country since 2019 (see below).[6] This was in addition to its growing unwillingness to accept Western democratic conditionality for closer Euro-Atlantic integration. What followed was the pursuit of an anti-US and anti-EU political project, accompanied by rapid autocratization. Since then, Georgian Dream has consistently portrayed the West as an external political enemy and used it as a scapegoat amid its governance shortcomings.[7] In reaction to this, and to the democratic backsliding in the country, Washington suspended the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership in 2024 and (alongside the EU, some of its member states, and the United Kingdom) sanctioned Georgian Dream figures and government officials. The country's EU accession process has been effectively frozen, the European Commission concluded in 2025 that Georgia is "a candidate country in name only",[8] and the EU has pursued the political isolation of Georgian Dream at the highest levels of government. Against this backdrop, Georgian Dream has undermined the elite-level consensus on joining the EU and NATO, paying only lip-service to these goals, while mainstream opposition parties and much

of the public still supports them. In a survey released in June 2026, 71% of Georgian respondents said they supported EU membership, illustrating the durability of the pro-EU consensus.[9] The latest polling data on support for NATO membership dates back to June 2025, when it was at 68 %.[10]

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In parallel, Georgian Dream has pursued warm and pragmatic ties with Russia since 2012, China since 2017, and particularly Iran since 2024. These offer Georgian Dream a degree of cover from Western pressure, an economic lifeline, comfortable political partnerships and a necessary external legitimacy. While relations with Russia remain politically contested due to the 2008 war and its occupation of Georgian territory since then, Georgian Dream has sustained and even strengthened its policy of economic engagement with it.[11] It has justified its approach toward Moscow partly on security grounds and the risk of renewed confrontation. Ties with China expanded beyond trade in 2023 with the signing of a strategic partnership, which was upgraded to a comprehensive one in June 2026, with cooperation expanding rapidly across all areas bar defense and security.[12] Yet, while China has become one of Georgia's largest trading partners, the issue of trade deficit looms large,[13] and Beijing has exited the project for building the strategically important Anaklia Deep Sea Port. Still, frequent high-level exchanges and developing economic ties offer Georgian Dream a vital legitimacy fallback amid its isolation in the West. Ties with Iran have also expanded with more diplomatic engagement, particularly since 2024 when Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze attended the funeral of President Ebrahim Raisi and then the inauguration of President Masoud Pezeshkian.[14] In July 2026, President Mikheil Kavelashvili, attended the funeral of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei who was killed in an airstrike. As Iran does not rank among Georgia's major trade partners—trade turnover between the countries was at $322 million in 2024[15]—Georgian Dream's agenda is primarily political. It seeks to align Georgia's stance with that of its neighbors, which embrace political and economic engagement with Tehran, rather with the United States' policy of opposing Iran militarily, politically, and economically.

Democratic Backsliding Under Georgian Dream

The modernizing and anti-corruption reforms under Saakashvili and the UNM set Georgia's state institutions on the right footing, but their democracy and human rights record was increasingly criticized during their time in power.[16] They left behind a fragile democracy without strong institutional safeguards alongside highly contentious politics. When it entered government in 2012, Georgian Dream said it would strengthen democratic institutions and reduce polarization, but concerns regarding democratic governance emerged during its first years in power. After gaining a supermajority in parliament in the 2016 elections, the party set out to eliminate genuine electoral competition incrementally by blurring the line between itself and the state, and to subjugate state institutions to partisan ends.[17] The political tensions that subsequently developed into a protracted crisis boiled over in June 2019. Protests erupted after a Russian parliamentarian addressed an international meeting in Russian from the speaker's chair in the Georgian Parliament—a highly provocative act given Russia's continued occupation of Abkhazia and

Samachablo (South Ossetia). The protests soon encompassed broader concerns regarding government accountability, democratic governance, and the state's response to public dissent. The government was widely criticized after security forces used disproportionate force, including with tear gas and rubber bullets, to disperse protesters, resulting in hundreds of injuries. In 2025, the European Court of Human Rights found that Georgia had violated the human rights of 26 protesters and journalists among the injured.[18] Following the disputed 2020 parliamentary elections, which were rejected by the opposition, European Council President Charles Michel brokered an agreement to restore political dialogue and advance electoral and judicial reforms. However, the agreement collapsed after Georgian Dream went back on key commitments.[19] These episodes reinforced concerns regarding the government's commitment to political pluralism, democratic reforms, and externally mediated compromise.

In domestic matters as in foreign policy, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was the decisive juncture, with a significant increase in the scale and pace of democratic decline since.[20] As noted, it fundamentally reshaped Georgian Dream's political rhetoric about the West. With senior party figures portraying the United States and the EU as seeking to drag Georgia into the war and to interfere in its domestic affairs, democratic reforms called for by the West were framed less as conditions for Euro-Atlantic integration than as external pressure threatening sovereignty and stability. This shift was accompanied by the systematic consolidation of Georgian Dream's hold on power. The adoption of the widely criticized Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence in 2024 (which resembling Russia's "foreign agents" legislation) was a watershed in the government's approach to independent civil society and media. It is part of a broader effort to reduce independent oversight by stigmatizing organizations involved in election observation, human rights, anti-corruption advocacy, and government accountability.[21]

Recent developments suggest Georgian Dream is increasingly willing to restrict the space for any meaningful political contestation.

The 2024 parliamentary elections were widely judged in Georgia and abroad as not free and fair.[22] Since then, the government has used restrictive legislation, criminal investigations, administrative sanctions, and law-enforcement measures to limit, monitor, and, in some cases, criminalize the activities of opposition politicians, journalists, protesters, and civil society organizations.[23] At the same time, state institutions have appeared to serve the interests of Georgian Dream rather than functioning as independent checks on executive power. The party has declared its intention to ban the five opposition parties and exclude their figures from running for office—with first hearings in the Constitutional Court held in October 2026[24]—which would fundamentally narrow political pluralism and raise serious concerns regarding the 2028 elections. Rather than merely seeking to secure electoral advantage, recent developments suggest Georgian Dream is increasingly willing to restrict the space for any meaningful political contestation. The 2026 V-Dem Democracy Report classifies Georgia as an electoral autocracy, showing the extent to which the country's democratic decline over recent years.[25]

Underlying all these political developments, the growing disconnect between formal institutions and the exercise of political power has been the defining characteristic of the Georgian Dream era. Power is

exercised more through informal networks centered around Bidzina Ivanishvili rather than transparent democratic institutions. Although he served as prime minister for only one year in 2012–2013 and has since repeatedly announced his retirement from politics, he has never ceased to shape the country's political direction. As Georgian Dream's founder, principal financier, and ultimate political arbiter, Ivanishvili has exercised decisive influence over the country's political and geopolitical direction, lately in his capacity as the honorary chairperson of the party. According to a recent estimate, his personal fortune is approximately $2.7 billion.[26] However, his influence extends well beyond his financial resources. Through a model of informal governance, he shapes all key political decisions while remaining largely insulated from direct political accountability.

The Rise of Georgian-US Alignment

Under Saakashvili and the UNM from 2004 to 2013, Georgia became one of the United States' closest partners in the Black Sea region, with a firmly pro-West foreign policy and an ambitious agenda of political and economic reform. The relationship evolved through a mutually reinforcing process: Georgia's reform efforts and Euro-Atlantic ambitions were met with strong US political and security support, which in turn strengthened the country's capacity to pursue its Western integration agenda. The relationship thus rested on overlapping strategic interests and shared values.

Although Georgia was never a substantial economic partner, the United States viewed it as having significant geopolitical value due to its location at the intersection of Europe and Asia.[27] Seen as a critical transit corridor connecting the Caspian region to European markets, the country became an important element within US efforts to promote connectivity, energy diversification, and stability in the South Caucasus. Its aspiration to join NATO and willingness to contribute to US- and NATO-led military operations strengthened bilateral security cooperation. Despite its limited size and resources, Georgia became one of Washington's most reliable security partners in the region, including by deploying troops to Afghanistan and Iraq. For example, in 2012, it was one of the largest troop contributors, and the largest non-NATO one, to the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, with more than 1,500 personnel.[28] By comparison, the largest troop presence of two slightly more populous NATO countries, Denmark and Croatia, was about 750 and 350 respectively. Altogether, Georgia reportedly sent 22,175 soldiers to Afghanistan and 8,495 in Iraq.[29] This earned it credibility in Washington.

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In return, the United States invested heavily in Georgia's defense modernization through military assistance, training programs, and joint exercises aimed at strengthening combat readiness, territorial defense capabilities, and interoperability with NATO forces.[30] A focal point of this commitment to training was the establishment of a combat training center in the country in 2016,[31] in addition to the steady flow of financing of US military purchases for Georgia via the Foreign Military Financing program.[32]

Russia's 2008 war against Georgia was a critical turning point in the relationship. While it exposed the limits of the United States' security support to its non-allied partners, it also reinforced Georgia's

strategic significance, which was demonstrated by the 2009 Charter on Strategic Partnership. The war positioned the country as a frontline state confronting Russian revisionism in the post-Soviet space. In the years that followed, bipartisan support for it remained strong, and Washington expanded security cooperation while continuing to back its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and Euro-Atlantic aspirations.[33]

During this period, the relationship was also grounded in a normative alignment. The United States did not only view Georgia as a strategic partner but also as a country whose trajectory broadly reflected its preferences in the region for democratic development and Western integration.[34] There was in Washington a widely shared perception of Georgia as a rare democratic success story in the post-Soviet space. The pursuit of a reform agenda under Saakashvili and the UNM, particularly the efforts to combat corruption and modernize state institutions, generated substantial bipartisan support in the United States. President George W. Bush demonstrated this perception during his 2005 visit to the country, when he described it as a "beacon of liberty" whose democratic trajectory could inspire change far beyond the South Caucasus.[35]

Growing Tensions and Weakening Alignment

Over time, however, the foundations of this alignment began to erode. Growing worries in Washington regarding Georgia's domestic political trajectory, coupled with shifting regional dynamics, intensifying great-power competition, and changing US priorities, weakened the assumptions that had previously underpinned the partnership.[36] US engagement gradually became more cautious, conditional, and selective. The relationship initially remained stable after Georgian Dream came to power in 2012. The United States viewed the country's first peaceful transfer of power from one party to another as a democratic milestone rather than as auguring a geopolitical shift.

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The Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations continued to support Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations while Georgian Dream formally maintained the government's commitment to integration with NATO and EU. The first Trump administration reiterated US support for Georgia's NATO aspirations, which it highlighted with a visit by Vice President Mike Pence in 2017.[37] The Biden administration voiced concerns about democratic backsliding in the country at the beginning of its term, but continued engagement to bring Georgia closer to Euro-Atlantic institutions.[38] Tensions intensified after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and further following Georgia's controversial 2024 parliamentary elections. Georgian Dream's refusal to impose sanctions on Russia and expanding economic ties with it, alongside the increasing democratic backsliding and confrontational rhetoric toward Western partners widened the gap between Tbilisi and Washington, with political trust between them steadily eroding.

The deterioration of Georgia's democracy has coincided with a decline in its importance for the United States' global agenda. Since the Maidan revolution and Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and especially since the full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukraine became the focus of US attention in the region, as a geopolitical issue and as an exemplar of democratic reform efforts.[39] By contrast, for Washington,

the benefits of engagement with the Georgian Dream government have gradually been outweighed by the frustration in dealing as well as by its positioning toward Russia and growing relationship with China. However, despite the growing tension in the relationship, the United States did not disengage. At the same, Washington increasingly combined pressure on the Georgian government. This culminated in the last months of the Biden administration, following the 2024 parliamentary elections, with the suspension of the Strategic Partnership and additional visa restrictions and individual sanctions, including against Ivanishvili. The continuation of cooperation in defense, regional security, and connectivity initiatives demonstrated that Georgia remained relevant to US regional calculations, albeit to a lesser degree than in previous years. And, while executive attention to Georgia decreased across success administrations, Congress continued to push policies aimed at the country.

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The lack of strong policy attention to Georgia in Washington helps explain the uncertain trajectory of the MEGOBARI (Mobilizing and Enhancing Georgia's Options for Building Accountability, Resilience, and Independence) Act that was introduced in Congress in 2025.[40] (*Megobari* is the Georgian word for "friend", and the acronym is intended to emphasize continued support for Georgia and its people as concerns regarding its democratic trajectory intensify.) With bipartisan support and championed by some of Congress's most vocal supporters of Georgia, including Representatives Joe Wilson and Steve Cohen and Senator Jeanne Shaheen, the bill is a reaction growing frustration regarding democratic backsliding, corruption concerns, and foreign influence in the country. The debate surrounding the bill exposed a widening gap between congressional activism and executive priorities. While Congress has emphasized accountability measures and democratic concerns, the executive has demonstrated considerably less enthusiasm for investing political capital in Georgia-related initiatives. As a result, the act has become less a symbol of a coherent US strategy than an illustration of Washington's fragmented approach toward Georgia.

In June 2026, the House of Representatives adopted provisions in the National Defense Authorization Act that require the Trump administration to produce assessments of Russian and Chinese influence in the region, including in Georgia,[41] reflecting the growing tendency to frame the country as a geopolitical concern more than a democracy-related one. The act has now been referred to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. Similar concerns have emerged regarding Tbilisi's growing economic and diplomatic engagement with Iran.[42]

The Second Trump Administration and Georgia

The depth that the distrust between the two countries had reached was brought into the open in July 2025 when US Ambassador Robin Dunnigan revealed that a private letter sent by Georgian Dream to the Trump administration had been received "extremely poorly", describing its contents as "threatening", "insulting", and "unserious".[43]

Georgian Dream saw the election of Donald Trump in 2024 as an opportunity to reset ties with the United States on its own terms and to break out of its diplomatic and political isolation from the West.[44] It talked of starting the strategic partnership anew, essentially asking for transactional engagement free from any conditionality regarding Georgian Dream's domestic political conduct. When its claims of ideological alignment with the administration did not produce the hoped-for response, Georgian Dream added business deals and economic cooperation to the mix. In April 2025, during a trip to Washington, Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development Levan Davitashvili proposed signing a new framework memorandum of cooperation.[45] Four Georgian companies, including one owned by former Georgian Dream member of parliament, this year announced a deal with the Trump Organization to build a Trump Tower in Tbilisi on land part-owned by Ivanishvili's son,[46] with the project launched in September.[47] However, these efforts to generate US interest in a reset in relations have largely fallen flat thus far.[48]

Georgian Dream saw the election of Donald Trump in 2024 as an opportunity to reset ties with the United States on its own terms.

The fact that a new ambassador has not been nominated since Dunnigan left in July 2025 has also limited high-level political engagement. However, this should not necessarily be interpreted as a deliberate political signal toward Georgia. The administration has left many ambassadorial posts unfilled, including in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Overall, since the start of the administration, there has not been any significant upgrading or downgrading of the relationship.

The administration's engagement in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process, especially with the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) initiative, has renewed US interest in the South Caucasus. This and the war with Iran have put relations Georgia in a new light. In November 2025, a State Department senior advisor visited Tbilisi to discuss how it could support the TRIPP (which would reduce Georgia's importance as a transit country).[49] In March 2026, there was a call between Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Prime Minister Kobakhidze, during which they reportedly discussed security and other issues.[50] There were also State Department visits to Tbilisi that month and in May.[51] In September, US defense officials met with counterparts in Georgia, which was followed by a visit by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Andrew Loomis to discuss defense cooperation.[52] These meetings demonstrated the administration's interest in preserving the possibility of greater engagement. In September, Kobakhidze said he that he had briefly spoken to Trump and Rubio on the margins of the UN General Assembly,[53] and the following month he said the government was ready to restore the strategic partnership during a meeting with the new US chargé d'affaires.[54]

While the administration has generally responded to Georgian Dream's overtures with disinterest, it did privately lay out preconditions for any reset.[55] The May 2026 visit by State Department officials included meetings with the major opposition parties as well as with Georgian Dream, and the delegation laid out two major conditions for forging a "sustainable strategic partnership": a favorable business environment for American companies and a stable domestic politics ensuring opposition engagement.[56] In its meeting with the opposition parties, the delegation also highlighted the importance of opposition being engaged with the state institutions to represent its voters. The following month, Rubio told the House Foreign Affairs Committee that the United States had outlined the steps required from Georgia to improve

relations, after Georgian officials had reached out to the administration.[57] Georgian Dream disputed aspects of Rubio's characterization of their communication, but it did not deny the tenor of the message.

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So far, Georgian Dream appears to have failed to secure a transactional relationship with the Trump administration fully devoid of conditions related to its domestic political conduct. What Washington is seemingly asking is for the rule of law and political pluralism to be an organizing principle of Georgian politics, which is precisely what Georgian Dream has been working for years to destroy. The government has not given any sign of softening its authoritarian behavior following its recent engagement with the United States.[58] And, as noted, Georgia has upgraded its strategic relationship with China and maintained good relations with Iran. Georgian Dream is therefore signaling that its domestic political conduct is non-negotiable and that it has options beyond Washington.

Paradoxically, the developments that heightened tensions between the two countries also explain why the United States remains engaged. Georgia's growing ties with China make it more problematic. Connectivity initiatives such as the Middle Corridor and the TRIPP ensure that it remains relevant to broader regional calculations. Georgian Dream has sought to leverage this reality, arguing that the country is open to cooperating with all interested external actors (including China) and well positioned to connect East and West

Looking Ahead

The United States has not fully disengaged from Georgia—under the Trump administration, it is recalibrating its approach toward a partner that remains geopolitically important but is problematic in several ways. At the same time, in their relationship, the balance between the normative and geopolitical dimensions is increasingly tilting on the latter side. In this context, the future of the relationship in the short-to-medium term is unlikely to be one of complete restoration of the close partnership that existed during the 2000s or one of total breakdown, but rather something in-between.

A transactional reset cannot be ruled out, with Georgia's government making limited concessions to the United States to facilitate a partial normalization without addressing the deeper sources of political tension. This would include accommodating specific US economic and strategic interests as well as moderating the treatment of opposition figures and preserving minimal space for political competition. In return, Washington would restore higher-level political contacts, expand economic and security cooperation, and reconsider some of its existing punitive measures, including on Ivanishvili, while stopping short of lifting the suspension of the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership. Meanwhile, disagreements over democracy issues would become more compartmentalized.

However, based on the latest evidence, the more likely scenario is one of a limited, issue-specific relationship. This would largely be a continuation of the pattern of the past couple of years rather than a broader reset or normalization. Cooperation would continue where the two countries' interests overlap,

mostly in regional security, connectivity, and some defense and economic issues. Such engagement would remain episodic and relatively narrow in scope and intensity. At the same time, relations would remain strained by disagreements over Georgia's domestic political situation and foreign-policy diversification, and marked by a degree of mistrust on both sides. US concerns about democracy issues would continue to be a factor to some extent, and higher-level diplomatic engagement would remain rare.

Conditional US Engagement

Both scenarios do not come close to a return of the broader strategic partnership of the past based on a mix of shared interests and values. Neither would this be a realistic goal to expect from US foreign policy in the next couple of years, given the political conditions in Georgia and the Trump administration's approach to international affairs. In this context, the risk for the United States is that engaging with Georgia only through the lens of great-power competition, regional geopolitics, and economic ties, with normative issues relegated to a secondary consideration, is not guaranteed to serve US long-term interests in the country and the South Caucasus. The rule of law, which Georgian Dream has severely undermined, is necessary for a reliable economic partnership and the commercial and connectivity projects involved. Greater American investment will rely on a predictable legal and regulatory environment in which American companies are protected from arbitrary interference and can rely on fair treatment by the Georgian authorities. In parallel, the absence of basic political pluralism and fair electoral competition could lead to domestic instability eventually, with implications for the security situation.

The United States should pursue conditional engagement amid persistent political disagreement, rather than a strategy of isolation or unconditional normalization.

As for Georgia, the risk is not confrontation but irrelevance. The government yearns for relevance in Washington but its chances of achieving this are low. For their part, the opposition parties and democracy activists clamor for the United States to pay attention to the democratic backsliding in the country, but they struggle to get it from an administration that cares less about values and more about geopolitical competition or economic deals.

In light of this, the United States should pursue conditional engagement amid persistent political disagreement, rather than a strategy of isolation or unconditional normalization, neither punishing nor accommodating Georgian Dream.

Beyond the extending the existing trend for cooperation on specific issues, the administration should avoid creating a vacuum through a prolonged absence of highly visible diplomatic engagement as this risks accelerating Georgia's drift toward alternative partners and reinforcing the public's perception that the West has abandoned the country. At the same time, it should not shy away from publicly expressing fair discontent if Georgian Dream continues to ignore Washington's concerns about its alignment with rival powers or its harsh treatment of the opposition figures and civil society.

Georgian Dream's continued desire for improved relations that would provide it with significant domestic and international benefits is one of the few sources of leverage available to the administration. It should use this to encourage the government in Tbilisi to take meaningful steps aimed at restoring political pluralism, civic space, and the competitiveness of elections—particularly with the milestone of the 2028 parliamentary elections in focus— in order to facilitate new steps in cooperation. Washington should make clear that further restrictions on opposition parties (including attempts to exclude major political forces from elections) would complicate rebuilding the relationship.

This would not make democracy promotion an organizing principle of policy toward Georgia as in the past. Rather, it would take as a limited but valuable strategic investment the inclusion of some degree of continued targeted support for independent media, educational exchanges, civil society organizations, and election-monitoring initiatives. These could contribute to the country's long-term political stability and thus serve US interests. It would also maintain societal ties between Georgia and the United States.

Conditional engagement will also need continued bipartisan attention to Georgia from Congress, independently of the exact line adopted by the administration. Renewed consideration or adaptation of legislation such as the MEGOBARI Act, alongside carefully designed steps such as high-level congressional bipartisan visits with an inclusive agenda, renewed attention through the Congressional Georgia Caucus, congressional hearings and statements, and sustained backing for civil society assistance funding, would also signal continued US attention to Georgia without suggesting unconditional support for Georgian Dream.

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Congressional efforts regarding Georgia have been notably bipartisan, which suggests that they will not be affected as party control of both chambers changes as a result of the November midterm elections. Given the sustained engagement of Democratic lawmakers on this issue in recent years, attention in Congress to the country's democratic trajectory might even increase (despite the retirement of Democratic Senator Jeanne Shaheen, one of the most senior "Georgia watchers" on Capitol Hill). Congress should therefore continue to act as an important channel for US engagement with the political situation in Georgia, even if the administration chooses to pursue the relationship primarily through economic and geopolitical considerations.

In any event, the administration and Congress should be cautious in interpreting tactical concessions as evidence of Georgian Dream's interest in restoring democratic standards. Previous attempts by Western actors to broker political compromises between the party and other political actors have demonstrated the weakness of such assumptions. Any normalization steps by the United States should therefore be tied to measurable actions and sustained implementation on the part of Georgian Dream rather than rhetorical commitments or symbolic gestures.

Endnotes

1 See, for example, Stephen F. Jones, Georgia: A Political History Since Independence, I. B. Tauris, 2012, p. 249; Michael Hikare Cecire, "Security and Symbolism: Georgia's NATO Aspirations in Perspective", in Kornely Kakachia and Michael Cecire (eds.), Georgian Foreign Policy: The Quest for Sustainable Security, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2013, pp. 66–67.

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