

Armenian-Georgian Strategic Cooperation: A New Era?

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Armenian-Georgian border sign in Bagratshen. Photo: Wikimedia Commons..

As small states with large powerful neighbors in a very demanding geopolitical area, it may appear from the outside that Armenia and Georgia have a lot in common. Can they take their partnership to the next level?

Over the past two decades, the geopolitical balance in the South Caucasus has changed dramatically, as a result of a series of dramatic security policy events not seen since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It all began with the Russian invasion of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia in 2008, which signaled Russia's return as a revanchist imperialist power in the international system, as well as the beginning of the end of what has come to be known as the "rules-based international order."

Furthermore, Azerbaijan's rapid military success against Armenia in 2020-2021 in the second war over Nagorno-Karabakh can also be considered a geopolitical milestone in the region. This marked the end of Russia's role as the region's "overlord" and gave the Turkish-Azerbaijani axis a significant victory and a boost in geopolitical influence in the South Caucasus. On a broader geostrategic level, the war illustrates the Kremlin's steady loss of influence throughout its traditional post-Soviet sphere of influence.

Furthermore, as a result of the war against Ukraine, Russia's influence in the South Caucasus continues to be further under pressure. The challenging military situation on the ground weakens Russia's military capacity for power projection in the region. At the same time, powerful forces in all the South Caucasian nations – Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan – appear to be increasingly united in their desire to remove Russian influence from the region once and for all, despite significant differences between the latter two.

In this new geopolitical milieu, two of the South Caucasian nations seem to have a lot in common. Both Armenia and Georgia are small states without large gas and oil reserves and a "geopolitical big brother" that offers protection (unlike Azerbaijan), and they have much to gain from a closer relationship. At the beginning of the year, therefore, Yerevan and Tbilisi signed an agreement to take their relationship to the next level through the signing of an agreement on strategic cooperation.

But this collaboration is still in its infancy and there is a lot of uncertainty about what it will actually mean in practice. In order to try to gain a little more insight into the bilateral relationship between these two small but geostrategically important nations in the South Caucasus, Geopolitika has therefore contacted two geopolitical analysts from both countries:



Georgian **Victor Kipiani** is the founder and head of the think tank GeoCase. His interests include international relations, security, governance, implications of the global order for Georgia and for its neighborhood and macroeconomics. He regularly covers these topics in both English and Georgian media. He is also a frequent commentator on the latest political developments in Georgia as well as on various global geopolitical trends and events.

Armenian **Gevorg Malikyan** served as a foreign policy advisor to Armenia's former president Armen Sarkissian from 2018 to 2022. He is also the founder of the think tank Armenian Institute for Resilience & Statecraft. Melikyan is frequently quoted in the Armenian media and often appears on television in the country to discuss and comment on geopolitical issues.



Geopolitics: - Georgia and Armenia seem to be in similar situations in a geopolitically demanding region. Can they find common ground and improve their cooperation?

Melikyan: - There is certainly a positive dynamic between Tbilisi and Yerevan. Indeed, Armenia is trying to improve its cooperation with Georgia in a number of areas. On January 26, there was a joint declaration on "Establishment of a strategic partnership between Armenia and Georgia," which promises to a) further improve the political dialogue; b) promote cooperation in different sectors, focusing on exploring new directions for trade, economy, energy, transport, telecommunications and logistics; c) cooperate within

international organizations; d) strengthen cooperation in the humanitarian field and in education, science and culture; e) complete the process of demarcation/demarcation of the state border; and f) deepen consultations to explore new avenues for regional cooperation to better contribute to peace and security in the neighborhood and beyond.

- However, I would describe this as an 'agreement of intent' rather than an 'agreement on strategic partnership', because until now we have not seen anything concrete beyond the intentions on paper. Furthermore, trade turnover between the two nations is not significant, with limited Georgian investment in Armenia and vice versa. Although bilateral relations are generally stable, there is considerable room for improvement. Relations between Armenia and Georgia could certainly be stronger.

- In addition, Georgians are paying close attention to the potential outcomes of the upcoming elections in October, which may be decisive for the country's future geopolitical trajectory. Whether they want to continue their western course, or seek closer relations with Russia. As a result, the political situation in Georgia remains somewhat unstable, especially considering Tbilisi's future balancing act in its political relationship with Russia and the West.

- Furthermore, Georgia's candidate status for the EU is effectively put on hold. Although many in Georgia hope for a change if the opposition wins the election, this is far from certain. According to various European and American sources, when an integration mechanism for a country is put on hold, it means that it is put on hold and cannot be easily switched on and off with every political change in Georgia.

Kipiani: - Georgia and Armenia have maintained close ties in many areas since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. But recently these relationships have become even more important, meaningful and purposeful. This is due to several reasons.

- On the Georgian side, the decisive factor is the country's candidate status in the EU, which has significantly enriched bilateral relations. At the same time, changes in Armenia have led to the authorities there trying to a reasonable extent to distance the nation from the Russian sphere of influence in favor of a more pro-European agenda.

- Sometimes I refer to this change as an 'Armenian Zeitenwende', which may seem like an exaggerated term to some, but I think it makes a lot of sense. Therefore, with Georgia moving towards EU integration and Armenia gaining momentum towards the same, both countries find themselves better aligned for increased cooperation with each other at this historic crossroads.

- Do you have any opinions about what is holding the relationship back?

Melikyan: - The Armenian side has consistently confirmed the significant potential for improving relations and cooperation with Georgia. There is indeed a significant opportunity for a robust partnership between the two countries. However, this potential is currently realized only in a limited number of concrete political areas.

- I cannot claim that closer cooperation can be achieved solely by implementing specific policies, despite our lengthy discussions about this potential. Unfortunately, our relationship with Georgia is not as close as it could or should be, and I believe that Russia has a significant influence on this limitation.

- The lack of strategic thinking in Armenia is actually partly due to concerns about Russia. Many in the West, as well as in Armenia, argue that Russia's influence in the Caucasus is waning. Some experts even argue that Russia's presence in the region is effectively over. This perspective suggests that we should shift our focus completely, and focus exclusively on strengthening relations with the West.

- It would be beneficial if these claims were accurate, but they are not. The governments in Tbilisi and Yerevan have a more realistic perspective on the situation and remain wary of Russia's presence in both Georgia and Armenia. Russia does not support closer relations between our countries, which could potentially lead to a more united Armenian-Georgian front, as this could undermine Moscow's influence and threaten its geopolitical interests in the Caucasus.

- Therefore, while we aim to establish an emerging strategic partnership, I believe Russia will take steps to sabotage it. In addition, I think the Americans also have concerns. Currently, Georgia is no longer as favored by the Americans and Europeans as it once was, due to the Georgian Dream government's ambiguous foreign policy.

- This situation also emphasizes how quickly American and European politics can change. Instead of promoting Georgia's inclusion in NATO and the European Union, they have now stopped a series of measures for increased integration and interconnection, including the suspension of visa-free talks with Georgia.

Kipiani: - I largely agree with Gevorg's assessment. If one examines the strategic partnership statement, in practical terms, one will not find any new elements that were not already established. However, despite the lack of novelty in substance, I must emphasize that elevating our relationship to a strategic partnership has been significant and reflects a new reality not only for Armenia, but also for Georgia.

- For many years, Armenia was assigned a lower status than Azerbaijan in Georgian foreign policy documents. Addressing this imbalance and giving Armenia equivalent status has been a timely step in the right direction to maintain a "regional balance" from Georgia's perspective. I think both sides appreciate this decision. But I agree with my Armenian counterpart that beyond the formal release of the statement there needs to be deeper substance and meaning as well.

- Regarding the possibility that Russia may try to sabotage the development of a real strategic partnership between Yerevan and Tbilisi, I am honestly not aware of any specific and concrete examples from the recent past in that context. However, given Russia's traditionally disruptive and destructive behavior in the region, it is quite plausible that they may try to sabotage a closer relationship between Tbilisi and Yerevan.

- Do not forget that Armenia has been a critical ally for Russia in the South Caucasus for many decades, if not centuries. So naturally, a real alignment between Georgia and Armenia—especially as both nations

move toward the EU—would be against Russian interests. Therefore, it would not surprise me if Moscow's interference in the process becomes more evident and more pronounced over time.

- So, what concrete measures can be taken to raise the bilateral relationship to the next level?

Melikyan: - First of all, Georgia and Armenia should significantly improve their trade relations beyond just using Georgia as a transit corridor. They should encourage mutual investment in both countries and explore ways to improve cooperation in sectors such as education, artificial intelligence and start-ups. Cooperation in industries such as wine production, for example, could be particularly fruitful.

- I also think that the initiative for a strategic partnership should come from Armenia rather than Georgia, as both countries benefit from each other, although Armenia may need Georgia a little more. Therefore, Armenia should take proactive steps. As mentioned, in January we signed an agreement on strategic partnership, but so far it remains mostly only in paper form.

- In summary, although Armenia and Georgia share many commonalities, it appears that both countries are not fully exploiting the significant and crucial potential available to them. To address this, we need to establish a comprehensive agreement that encompasses a wide range of elements, including full military cooperation, and outlines a clear conceptual approach for relations between Armenia and Georgia. This agreement should also detail how to operationalize this vision with concrete measures. Although the potential is significant, it is now crucial to translate this potential into tangible results.

Kipiani: - I think these measures could span several political and economic issues. The first problem relates to Armenia being a landlocked state. Maintaining good neighborly relations with Georgia is therefore crucial to Armenia's sustainability, especially in terms of economic viability. By fostering good relations with Georgia, Armenia gains access to the Black Sea and to the Russian Federation, which remains the main market for Armenian import and export goods. This is one side of the matter.

- The other side concerns the cultural and historical ties we share, especially considering the significant Armenian minority population in Georgia. Elevating our relationship to a strategic partnership underlines the importance we place on these cultural and historical connections.