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Hedging and Anchoring: Georgia's Real Foreign-Policy Challenge

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Reading Victor Kipiani's recent essay on hedging, national interest, and the emerging international order, I found myself reflecting on many of the same questions. His observations are timely and thought-provoking. Yet they also led me to revisit several lessons that Georgia has learned - sometimes painfully - during the past three decades of independence.

Much of what Mr. Kipiani describes is difficult to dispute. The international system is becoming less predictable. National interests are increasingly asserted with fewer ideological reservations. Economic security, technology, supply chains, and even arts and education have become matters of national security. In many respects, the world is indeed becoming more transactional, more competitive, and less governed by universally accepted rules.

The question, however, is not whether these trends exist. They clearly do. The question is what they mean for Georgia.

This is where I find myself approaching the discussion from a somewhat different angle. Concepts such as hedging, diversification, strategic flexibility, or multi-vector engagement may appear universally applicable. In reality, every country practices them under very different circumstances. The room for maneuver available to a great power, a regional power, and a small state is not the same.

And this distinction matters.

A country with strategic depth, substantial military capabilities, and diversified economic ties can afford a degree of ambiguity in its external relationships. A country whose territory remains partially occupied and whose security environment remains fundamentally unsettled faces a different reality. For such a country, hedging may be a useful technique. It cannot easily become a substitute for strategic direction.

This distinction is particularly relevant in light of a formulation that has recently appeared in official discourse. The Government's latest report states that Georgia continues its "multi-vector cooperation and harmonization with the European Union." At first glance, the phrase appears entirely reasonable. Yet it raises an important conceptual question.

Is harmonization with the European Union one vector among many? Or is it the broader strategic framework within which Georgia develops its relations with multiple actors?

For much of the country's post-independence history, the answer was relatively clear. European and Euro-Atlantic integration were understood not as one foreign-policy option among several equally weighted alternatives, but as a strategic choice that helped define Georgia's long-term political, economic, and institutional trajectory.

This understanding was rooted in a broader conception of state-building that emerged during Georgia's difficult transition from the collapse of the Soviet Union. The country's strategic vector was never intended to be merely geopolitical. It was also value-based and institutional.

Eduard Shevardnadze's concept of foreign policy was never based on geopolitical improvisation. It was rooted in a strategic choice. For him, Georgia first had to determine the direction of its historical and political development and only then build relations with others from that foundation.

By a value-based orientation, Shevardnadze meant more than a Western geopolitical preference. He meant democratic institutions, the rule of law, political pluralism, and the gradual integration of Georgia into the Euro-Atlantic political and security space. He did not always succeed. His tenure was marked by compromises, setbacks, zigzags, and unfinished reforms. He also valued power and sought to retain it, as most politicians do. Yet he was never obsessed with power for its own sake. Despite mistakes and contradictions, he continued to move Georgia - often slowly, sometimes unevenly - toward what he believed to be its strategic destination.

At the same time, he never argued that a Western orientation required hostility toward Russia or prevented Georgia from maintaining normal relations with any neighbor. On the contrary, he believed that only a state anchored in clear values and functioning institutions could conduct balanced and constructive relations with all of its partners.

This distinction remains important today. Shevardnadze understood that a strategic orientation is not a declaration of loyalty but a framework of predictability. In relations with the United States and Europe, trust has traditionally been measured less by political obedience than by credibility, consistency, and the ability to honor commitments. A country may disagree with Washington on specific policies and still remain a trusted partner. The decisive question is not whether it follows instructions, but whether it is predictable, reliable, and institutionally capable of sustaining the course it has chosen.

This differs from a more traditional understanding of international relations often encountered in the post-Soviet space, where trust can become intertwined with political loyalty and where neutrality or strategic ambiguity may itself be viewed with suspicion. For Georgia, therefore, the challenge has never been to demonstrate obedience to one power or another. It has been to convince its partners that its choices are durable, its institutions resilient, and its commitments credible.

The objective was not simply to move Georgia closer to Western institutions abroad, but to move it closer to European standards of governance at home: stronger democratic institutions, greater respect for the rule of law, a functioning state, and an increasingly open political system. Whether these ambitions were fully realized is, of course, another matter. They were not. Progress was uneven and often frustratingly slow. There were mistakes, compromises, setbacks, and more than a few zigzags along the way. Yet despite these shortcomings, the destination itself remained largely unchanged.

The logic was straightforward: first define the strategic direction; then pursue pragmatic relations with all states - large and small, neighboring and distant - without losing sight of that direction. That approach did not view strategic orientation and diplomatic flexibility as contradictory. It viewed them as complementary.

This was, broadly speaking, the strategic logic that guided much of Georgia's foreign policy during the Shevardnadze years and, despite political changes, continued to shape the country's trajectory thereafter, till 2018 exactly.

Indeed, if there is one lesson that emerges from Georgia's modern foreign-policy experience, it is that our greatest successes were achieved not through strategic ambiguity, but through strategic clarity.

The most consequential achievements of the past three decades - the establishment of a strategic partnership with the United States, the development of the East-West energy corridor, the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, cooperation with NATO, the deepening of relations with the European Union, and the gradual integration of Georgia into Euro-Atlantic political, economic, and security structures - did not emerge from uncertainty about Georgia's place in the world. They emerged precisely because that place was being defined.

The European dimension deserves particular emphasis. If the United States provided critical strategic support and security engagement, the European Union became an equally important anchor for Georgia's modernization. Through legal approximation, institutional reform, economic integration, educational exchanges, visa liberalization, and the promotion of governance standards, the EU helped shape not only Georgia's external orientation but also many aspects of its internal transformation.

> Georgia succeeded when it was able to answer a simple question posed, implicitly or explicitly, by every international partner: Where does Georgia stand? The answer was never perfect. Nor was it free of contradictions, disappointments, or setbacks. Yet it provided something indispensable: strategic direction.

At this point, however, a more fundamental question arises. What is the ultimate purpose of foreign policy? Is it simply to maximize options? To maintain flexibility? To avoid excessive dependence on any single actor?

These are important objectives. Yet they are not ends in themselves.

For a small state, foreign policy is ultimately judged by a far simpler criterion: does it strengthen the country's security, prosperity, and capacity to survive in a difficult environment?

Hedging is an instrument. Diversification is an instrument. Dialogue is an instrument. Even alliances are instruments. The strategic question is what these instruments are intended to achieve.

For Georgia, the answer has remained remarkably consistent throughout the years of independence. We have sought security, sovereignty, economic development, and the consolidation of our statehood. The methods have evolved. Governments have changed. International circumstances have shifted dramatically. Yet these objectives have remained largely unchanged.

The real challenge, therefore, is not how many options Georgia can accumulate. The challenge is whether those options strengthen or dilute our ability to achieve these fundamental goals.

This is where I would introduce a concept that, in my view, deserves equal attention alongside hedging: anchoring.

> Hedging helps states navigate uncertainty. Anchoring helps them preserve direction.

In many respects, the story of Georgia's foreign policy since independence has been less a story of hedging than a story of anchoring: anchoring in Western institutions, anchoring in strategic partnerships, anchoring in the European political and economic space, and anchoring in a wider community of democratic nations.

Every state has interests. The real question is whether others see value in supporting them.

Georgia's greatest achievements occurred when it succeeded in becoming necessary, valuable, useful, and trustworthy to its partners. That was true for the East-West energy corridor. It was true for our security cooperation. It was true for our relations with the United States and Europe. And it remains true today.

A small country cannot demand relevance. It must create it. And it cannot create it through ambiguity alone. Relevance rests on credibility; credibility rests on trust; and trust, ultimately, rests on a clear sense of direction.

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