



# Almanach

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## Almanach # 5

**Tedo Japaridze**

### **Can America Remain America? — Can Georgia Remain Georgia?**

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**10 June 2026**

## Can America Remain America? — Can Georgia Remain Georgia?

**Tedo Japaridze**

For many years, I believed that one of the most common mistakes made by small states was to mistake a change of administration in Washington for a change in America itself. Administrations come and go. Presidents come and go. Political fashions rise and fall. Institutions, traditions, and national habits tend to endure much longer. For decades, this seemed a reasonable assumption.

Today, however, a more difficult question presents itself. What if America itself is changing? This question matters not only to Americans. It matters profoundly to countries like Georgia.

For more than three decades, Georgia's Western orientation was never based solely on security guarantees, financial assistance, or geopolitical calculations. It was also based on something less tangible but equally important: the belief that America represented more than power. It represented a model - not a perfect or infallible one, but a model nonetheless: a constitutional state grounded in the rule of law, political pluralism, independent institutions, individual liberty, and government accountable to citizens rather than citizens accountable to government. For many Georgians of my generation, America was not merely a country. It was an idea. The attraction was never simply geopolitical. It was civilizational.

Today, many observers fear that America is becoming more transactional, more polarised, and less attached to some of the values that once distinguished it. Donald Trump has become the symbol of those concerns. His supporters see him as a corrective; his critics see him as a challenge to the norms and institutions that long defined the American political system. History will eventually decide which interpretation proves more accurate.

For the moment, however, another question seems more important. Can America become more transactional without abandoning the principles that made it attractive in the first place? And if America itself is changing, what happens to countries that built part of their strategic identity around the assumptions of an earlier era?

This question may sound abstract. For Georgia, it is not.

Small states do not choose the international environment in which they operate. They inherit it. They adapt to it. And sometimes they become its victims. If America changes, the consequences rarely remain confined within its borders. The international system adjusts. Allies adjust. Adversaries adjust. Small states adjust. Georgia will not remain untouched by such a transformation.

For more than three decades, Georgia's strategic choices were made on the assumption that the world was moving, however imperfectly, toward a greater role for rules, institutions, democratic governance, economic openness, and international cooperation. What if that assumption is becoming less certain? What if the world's leading power increasingly emphasises transactions over principles, interests over values, and immediate advantage over long-term institutional commitments? For countries like Georgia,

this is not merely a question about America. It is a question about the future character of the international order itself.

Yet before addressing that question, it is worth recalling a lesson from our own experience.

Eduard Shevardnadze (President of Georgia from 1995 to 2003) understood that Georgia could not choose its geography. Russia would remain a neighbour. Türkiye, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Iran would remain part of Georgia's strategic environment. None of that could be negotiated away. Yet he never believed geography should determine strategic identity. His argument was that Georgia first had to make a value-based choice about the kind of state it wished to become. Once that choice was made, pragmatic relations with any neighbour remained possible. The Western vector was never solely a foreign-policy position. It was also a domestic project - inseparable from institution-building, the rule of law, and political pluralism.

He did not fully accomplish those goals, and no honest observer would claim otherwise. He loved power and was determined to retain it. He made mistakes, some serious. But he was not prepared to exchange Georgia's strategic orientation for political convenience. Through wars, crises, and setbacks, the Western vector remained intact. Yes, he treated power as an instrument of policy, but he did not redefine the country's strategic destination in order to preserve his own position.

That distinction may be more important today than ever.

Because the challenge facing Georgia is not whether America is changing. Great powers change, as they always have. Small states, however, cannot afford to redefine their strategic identity every time great powers redefine their priorities. The challenge is whether Georgia retains confidence in its own strategic choice while adapting to a changing international environment. A nation that loses confidence in its direction every time the world changes course eventually loses direction altogether.

For many years, Georgia occupied a disproportionately important place in American strategic thinking. Not because it was large. Not because it was rich. Not because it possessed decisive military capabilities. Georgia mattered because it represented something larger than itself. In a difficult, faraway region, it was seen as a relatively stable, increasingly democratic, and generally reliable partner. It was viewed as a country moving - however imperfectly - toward the world of democratic governance, rule of law, economic openness, and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Washington did not need to think about Georgia every day. It merely needed confidence that, in moments of regional uncertainty, Georgia would remain a trustworthy partner. That confidence gave Georgia a strategic significance that exceeded its objective weight. Because in international politics, reliability is a strategic asset. Georgia's greatest asset was not only American aid, military assistance, or diplomatic sympathy. It was American confidence. Confidence that Georgia broadly belonged to the same political family. Confidence that its direction was understandable. Confidence that in moments of regional tension, Georgia would remain a reliable partner. That confidence generated support far beyond Georgia's size, resources, or geopolitical weight.

Unfortunately, some of that strategic capital has been eroded.

Honesty requires acknowledging that this erosion was not driven solely by changes in Washington. Georgia's own recent choices and conduct - at home and abroad - have also contributed to it. The passage of legislation that many independent observers regarded as inconsistent with European standards, a contested electoral process, and concerns about the weakening of institutional checks and balances did not go unnoticed by Georgia's partners.

Friends and supporters did not lose confidence arbitrarily. Trust is not exhausted in a single moment; it erodes when the signals and realities they observe no longer correspond to the expectations upon which that trust was built. A relationship cannot be restarted from a "clean sheet" on the premise that those warnings and concerns were never communicated. They were communicated repeatedly. The question is not whether the messages were sent, but whether they were heard.

Whether fairly or unfairly, it seems to me that the broader West - and the current Washington establishment in particular - today looks upon Georgia with greater uncertainty than at any time in recent years. The issue is not the existence of disagreements. Allies often disagree. The issue is whether Georgia continues to be perceived as a stable democratic partner whose long-term trajectory remains clear. That perception cannot be restored through public relations campaigns, diplomatic slogans, or references to a "clean sheet." It can only be restored through the very qualities that originally created it: democratic legitimacy, institutional stability, rule of law, political pluralism, and strategic consistency.

Trust, once accumulated, becomes a strategic resource. Trust, once lost, requires time and effort to rebuild. It is against this background that recent calls for a "clean sheet" in U.S.-Georgia relations should be examined. A fresh start may be possible. Amnesia is not.

The relationship between Georgia and the United States was built over more than three decades around a shared assumption that Georgia sought to become part of the democratic community of nations. The current administration in Washington may place greater emphasis on reciprocity, strategic interests, and practical results than some of its predecessors. That is a legitimate subject of debate within America itself.

But the deeper question remains.

Can America become more transactional without abandoning the principles that made it attractive in the first place? Can liberty, constitutional government, equality before the law, political pluralism, judicial independence, and free elections become secondary considerations in a political system that long presented them as sources of national strength?

I remain sceptical.

For if those principles cease to matter, America risks losing something far more important than influence in Georgia. It risks losing the source of its own attraction.

Yet for Georgia, an equally important question follows. Great powers change; they always have. Small states cannot afford to redefine their strategic identity every time a great power redefines its priorities.

Georgia's task is not to imitate every turn in Washington's political debate. It is to preserve confidence in the principles that made its Western choice meaningful in the first place.

Georgia never looked to America merely because it was powerful. It looked to America because it represented a particular understanding of political order: constitutional government, the rule of law, institutional restraint, political pluralism, and liberty protected by law.

Georgia will remain Georgia not by distancing itself from its Western choice, but by remaining faithful to the principles that gave that choice meaning in the first place.

Can America remain America? History will answer that question. Whether Georgia can remain faithful to its own strategic choice is a question that only Georgians can answer.

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