



Forum

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Forum: Georgia at 35: Lessons of a Generation

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View from the United States

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View from the United States

Comment on Amb. Tedo Japaridze, "The Anchor before the Vectors".

It is a pleasure to comment on the article of my old friend, Ambassador Tedo Japaridze.

In principle, I agree strongly that in the design of foreign policy, any state should have a concept of what it is and who it is. The problem in practice is how to develop a consensual and enduring understanding of identity and purpose. Consensual in the sense that it is shared by the people **and** the political elite. Enduring in the sense that this understanding is stable over time as circumstances change. This is a very tall order.

Think about the US: Ambassador Japaridze suggests the US is a country that answers yes to his three questions: **Who are we, where do we belong, and what kind of state do we aspire to be?** It was never clear that the US had a clear and durable answer to these questions: On the "who" question, think about the treatment of those people in the thirteen colonies who opposed the revolution. Think about the issue of slavery and the inalienable right of human beings to live free, which produced the civil war. Or the longstanding debate about what kinds of immigrants were the "right" kind of people, which continues to this day. The point is that the US, like most countries, has unsettled questions about "who they are."

Then there is the issue of what the country should be. The questions arising for the US now are many. Is there a basic consensus on domestic governance? Judging from the past decade, the answer would have to be no. Is there a shared understanding of the parameters of economic policy? No. Or a basic consensus on immigration? No. That is to say, there is no national consensus on what the country should be.

What about America's role in the world? There is no consensus within American society on this, and there never has been. This problem dates back to George Washington's *Farewell Address*, in which he warned his countrymen of the dangers of engaging in foreign disputes and wars. The argument between internationalists and isolationists continues today. Leading to the final question: does the United States have a coherent and predictable foreign policy strategy? To judge from the current fiasco in Iran, or the on-again, off-again tariffs that are destroying the global economic system, or the chaos in US policy towards NATO, China, Russia, the UN, the EU and so on: no. So, I would suggest that the US fails Ambassador Japaridze's test. You could say the same about every other permanent member of the UN Security Council, with the possible exception of China.

Which brings me to Georgia. Of course, the United States is not comparable to Georgia. The US has a lot of depth and slack. They are big enough and rich enough to weather, so far, internal disarray and leadership failures. They have the largest and most capable military in the world to defend them. If they need cash, they can just borrow it; lenders, so far, are happy to buy their debt. The United States does not have potentially hostile great powers on their borders or nearby. And it can choose wars without reason and with no consideration of potential consequences (e.g., Iraq, Iran) and then weather the human and financial consequences.

In contrast, Georgia has very little depth of resources and very little slack. There does not appear to be any consensus on where Georgia belongs and what kind of state Georgia aspires to be. There appears to be a contradiction between a significant portion of the population and the governing elite

on where the Georgian nation belongs (e.g. the EU or NATO or both) and on the relationship with Russia.

Here, I cannot resist a comment on Ambassador Japaridze's view that "Georgia" embraced a "western orientation". To state the obvious, the current government does not appear to share that orientation. This government was elected the first time in a free and fair election. The last time, its party was elected in a manipulated election.

The manipulation made a difference at the margins in the election but did not affect the result. Georgian Dream did win a plurality of the vote. To some extent, the outcome reflects the weakness of and divisions in the Georgian opposition, but it may also suggest that a large portion of the population is sceptical of the domestic changes that would be necessary to "join the West". The government meanwhile appears to think it can be "in" the West without being "of" the West. Or maybe it does not want to be in the West at all. I don't really have a view on this. Georgians make their own choices and accept the consequences of their choices.

Georgia is a small country that has a powerful enemy on its borders, and ambivalent relations with all three of its other neighbours. Its military is not in a position to defend the country against its neighbours. Its economy and financial reserves are not large enough to afford big mistakes. It has no reliable allies, as was clear in 2008. Like many small states, it is in a dangerous and vulnerable situation.

The general position in the international relations literature is that states in such a position can balance (find allies to help it address the principal threat). That generally involves sacrifice (the casualties Georgia faced in Afghanistan are a case in point). Or it can bandwagon (appeasing the major threat to buy goodwill through the sacrifice of sovereignty). Or it can attempt to avoid the choice through manoeuvre. This brings me to multi-vector foreign policy and diplomacy.

I have long thought that a multi-vector approach to international relations was desirable for Georgia, given the lack of credible balancing options and given that bandwagoning with Russia was likely to jeopardise Georgia's hard-fought attainment of sovereignty and independence as well as its distinctive cultural and religious heritage. I expect that most Georgians also value the possibility of leading a decent life and the opportunity to have a say in governing. I would like to believe that these values are the guiding light of Georgia's government. I am not convinced that they are. But I keep an open mind.



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