

Commentary #38

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For Whom the Georgian Bell Tolls

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Bad habits die hard. Particularly diplomatic ones. During my years in government, whenever a major international summit approached - especially one bringing together the world's political heavyweights, the so-called Big Boys - President Eduard Shevardnadze would instruct us to prepare informal diplomatic memoranda, known in our profession as non-papers. We would discreetly circulate them among friends and trusted acquaintances in Western inner circles, among those preparing to sit around the negotiating table. The purpose was simple: to remind them about Georgia. About its existence, its aspirations, its problems, its vulnerabilities, and the risks it faced. We were realistic enough to understand that a small country could hardly dictate the agenda of the great powers. But we also knew that silence was not an option, particularly when the discussions might touch upon our country's future. We wanted Georgia to be remembered. Better still, we wanted its interests to be understood. By the way, that did not exclude informal communications with Russian diplomats in different Western capitals.

Decades later, long after my diplomatic career ended, that professional habit stubbornly refuses to disappear. These days, I am an eighty-year-old retired diplomat, unemployed, uninvited or undesirable to the corridors of power, and hardly in demand as a geopolitical adviser. I follow international developments as an ordinary citizen, without access to confidential briefings, privileged sources, or the private conversations of those who make the decisions. I do, however, retain something that retirement cannot quite erase: memory. Personal memory, professional memory, and fragments of institutional memory accumulated during the difficult decades when we tried to build an independent Georgian state and persuade the outside world that our country deserved attention.

I also retain a few old friends with whom I shared that experience. I deliberately say a few. Some of our companions have passed away. Others have simply disappeared from my radar - or perhaps, as happens in life, have deleted me from theirs. But with those who remain, I continue to exchange observations, arguments, questions, and occasionally rather gloomy reflections about the world around us. We are not privy to the deliberations of the powerful. We do not pretend to be. We are simply watching developments from the sidelines, comparing what we see today with what we remember from yesterday. And sometimes what we see makes us uneasy.

That uneasiness has returned as Moscow has sought to expand the negotiations over the war in Ukraine beyond the question of ending the hostilities, placing the broader architecture of European security on the negotiating agenda. With further encounters among the world's major powers potentially on the horizon, I cannot help wondering what such discussions might eventually mean for countries like Georgia. I have no intention of predicting another Yalta, another division of Europe, or some grand bargain in which smaller nations are exchanged like bargaining chips. Perhaps nothing of the sort will happen. Indeed, nothing would make me happier than to discover that my apprehensions were entirely misplaced.

But I have lived long enough, and participated in enough diplomatic encounters, to know that the interests of small countries do not always occupy a prominent place in the calculations of great powers. And so, despite my retirement, despite the absence of any official responsibility, I find myself returning to that old habit: putting a few thoughts on paper, asking uncomfortable questions, and wondering whether anyone might find them worth considering. Just in case.

A Word About the Title

Before becoming a diplomat, I was trained as a philologist, and old professional habits, it seems, are no less persistent than diplomatic ones. So I have taken the liberty of borrowing—and slightly adapting—the title of Ernest Hemingway's famous novel, For Whom the Bell Tolls. I also have a personal reason for this literary borrowing. During my university years, Hemingway's novel was among the essential home-reading assignments given to us by Professor Maya Doxopoulo, our beloved Miss Maya. More than half a century has passed, yet I still remember both the book and the professor who insisted that we read it. These days, the roles have been somewhat reversed: I regularly supply Miss Maya with my own daily digest of global developments, which I jokingly call *For Whom the Bell Calls* - a rather belated attempt to repay her kindness, though I suspect she never imagined what her former student's homework would eventually turn into.

I could hardly have imagined then that, decades later, after a long and occasionally turbulent journey through diplomacy and politics, I would return to Hemingway's title while reflecting on my country's geopolitical predicament. Hemingway himself borrowed the title from John Donne's famous meditation on the interconnectedness of human lives. I hope both gentlemen will forgive me for borrowing it once again. The Georgian bell in my title is not intended to announce an inevitable catastrophe. It is simply a reminder that when the great powers begin discussing the future of international security, even the smallest countries have reason to listen carefully. And perhaps to ring a bell of their own.

The Return of an Old Vocabulary

Something is happening in international politics. Perhaps nothing entirely unprecedented, but something sufficiently unsettling to awaken memories that I would much rather leave undisturbed. The negotiations over Russia's war against Ukraine appear to be moving, at Moscow's insistence, beyond the immediate questions of a ceasefire, territorial arrangements, and security guarantees for Ukraine. Russia has once again placed on the table its longstanding demand for a fundamental reconsideration of Europe's security architecture. That expression - European security architecture - sounds reassuringly technical, almost architectural in the literal sense, as though diplomats were discussing how to renovate an old building whose foundations had become unstable.

But what exactly is Moscow proposing to renovate? And whose security would this new architecture be designed to protect? The Russian proposals reported in recent days are hardly unfamiliar. They echo Moscow's demands of December 2021, shortly before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine: restrictions on NATO's further enlargement, a substantial rollback of the Alliance's military presence in Central and Eastern Europe, and limitations on Western military activities not only in Ukraine but also in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. The last two geographical references should attract particular attention in Tbilisi.

I do not know what the Americans are prepared to discuss, much less what they might eventually agree to. Nor do I assume that Washington, Brussels, or NATO's European members would accept Moscow's vision of a continent reorganised according to Russian preferences. Indeed, I believe that the Western powers have compelling reasons to reject any arrangement that would effectively dismantle the foundations of Europe's existing security order.

But my apprehension concerns something else and again, it’s just hypothetical. What if, while rejecting Moscow's maximalist demands, the principal negotiators nevertheless begin searching for compromises

in areas they regard as peripheral to their most important interests? What if some questions become negotiable precisely because they appear less important than others? And who decides which countries, territories, or security arrangements are peripheral?

Yalta 2.0? Perhaps Not. But...

The prospect of a meeting involving Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and Xi Jinping on the margins of the APEC summit in Shenzhen inevitably invites historical comparisons. I realize how easily such comparisons can become exaggerated. We are not living in 1945. The international system is different, Europe is different, and the distribution of global power is far more complicated than it was when Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill met in Tehran and Yalta, or when Truman joined Stalin and Churchill - later replaced by Attlee - at Potsdam.

Nevertheless, history has a stubborn habit of reminding us that great powers sometimes approach international problems through a rather uncomplicated formula: This is yours, that is mine; I accommodate you here, you accommodate me there. I am simplifying, of course. Perhaps even caricaturing. The actual diplomacy of Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam was infinitely more complex. But the underlying temptation to organise international affairs through understandings among the most powerful states has never entirely disappeared. Could something resembling that logic return? I do not believe that anyone is about to hand Europe over to Vladimir Putin. Nor do I believe that the United States could simply impose a new European security order without the participation, agreement, or resistance of its European allies.

Yet there is a difference between surrendering Europe and making selective concessions to Moscow in pursuit of other objectives. The United States – and the West as a whole - has a multitude of strategic problems to manage. China, nuclear arms control, regional conflicts, global security threats, and the broader question of strategic stability all compete for Washington's attention. Russia, whatever one's judgment of its conduct, remains a nuclear power whose cooperation, or at least acquiescence, may be useful in addressing some of these issues. The temptation to seek limited accommodations with Moscow is therefore not inconceivable.

And that is where my uneasiness begins. Suppose Washington and Moscow reach understandings on matters that each regards as important. Suppose certain other questions are treated as secondary, or are left deliberately ambiguous to facilitate agreement elsewhere. What might fall into that second category? We do not know. Perhaps nothing affecting Georgia. Perhaps no such bargain will emerge at all. I sincerely hope so. And I firmly remember my ambassadorial conversations in Washington when my American interlocutors ferociously neglected that the United States never trades with the independence and sovereignty of its friends. And we strongly appreciated that Georgia remained independent and sovereign, simply surviving as a country, thanks to America's generous support.

But there are other realities for a country like Georgia, situated where it is, with part of its internationally recognised territory under Russian occupation and its security environment remaining precarious, even the possibility of such bargaining deserves attention. The danger is not necessarily that Georgia will be explicitly traded away. It is that its interests might be insufficiently represented when larger compromises are contemplated.

The Geography of Russian Ambitions

Recent statements from Moscow add another dimension to these concerns. Following the November negotiations in Abu Dhabi, Vladimir Medinsky, a senior Russian official involved in the talks, declared that Russia would recover “every inch of Russian land, one way or another.” What exactly constitutes Russian land in this formulation? Is he referring exclusively to territories in Ukraine that Moscow claims as its own? Or does this language reflect a broader conception of Russian historical entitlement? It inevitably brings to mind the expansive notion, sometimes associated with Putin's rhetoric, that Russia's boundaries extend as far as the boots of its soldiers can carry them. Is this merely rhetorical imperial nostalgia, or does it reveal something more consequential about Moscow's understanding of its geographical and political reach? And what implications might such thinking have for Georgia? For other former Soviet republics?

I am not suggesting that Medinsky was necessarily referring to Georgia. He made the statement in the context of negotiations over Ukraine, and it would be intellectually dishonest to present a broader interpretation as established fact. But language matters in diplomacy. Particularly when territorial claims are expressed in terms that leave considerable room for interpretation. This is especially true when territorial claims are expressed in terms that leave considerable room for interpretation. And we have heard similar language before. I was also struck by the reported exchange after President Trump said Ukraine might eventually emerge from the war with a somewhat different geographical shape. Asked to comment, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov reportedly observed that, geographically speaking, Ukraine was already a different country and that the realities on the ground could not be denied.

Again, I understand the immediate context. But I cannot help wondering whether the increasingly frequent invocation of realities on the ground risks normalising a dangerous principle: that territorial changes achieved through military force can eventually become the starting point for political settlements. For Georgia, this is hardly an abstract theoretical concern. We have lived with the consequences of such realities for decades. And if the international community begins treating the results of military coercion as durable political facts, what message does that send to other vulnerable states?

Georgia: Once on the Agenda. But Today?

Perhaps my concerns are sharpened by personal memory. I remember all too well how difficult it was, in the early years of our independence, to persuade the outside world that Georgia mattered. We were emerging from the ruins of the Soviet Union, struggling with internal conflicts, institutional weakness, economic collapse, and the formidable task of establishing ourselves as a functioning sovereign state. To many in Washington and other Western capitals, Georgia was little more than an unfamiliar name on the map of a region they had only recently begun to rediscover.

We had to change that. And, without wishing to sound boastful, I believe we accomplished something remarkable. We did not simply wait for Western interest to materialise. We worked to create it. We tried to demonstrate that Georgia's independence, stability, and development were not merely Georgian concerns but were connected to broader Western interests: regional security, energy transportation, East-West connectivity, and the emergence of a more stable and cooperative international environment after the Cold War.

It was an effort conducted in two directions simultaneously. We had to persuade our Western partners that Georgia deserved their attention. But we also had to persuade people at home that our country's future depended on becoming a credible, predictable, and useful partner to the democratic world. Which task was more difficult? Even today, I would hesitate to answer. Neither was easy. Neither was entirely successful. Georgia's internal development did not always keep pace with its international aspirations, and we made our share of mistakes. Nevertheless, over time, Georgia acquired a recognisable place on the Western strategic agenda.

That achievement was neither automatic nor guaranteed. I am reminded of an anecdote involving James Baker, the American secretary of state during the final years of the Cold War. As some of his close advisers once recounted to me, they had urged Baker to become more actively involved in the problems of the Western Balkans. Baker listened to their arguments and reportedly responded with a characteristically blunt observation: “There should be at least a dog for America to fight for!” I recount the remark as it was related to me, rather than as a verbatim quotation I personally heard.

The underlying point was unmistakable. For the United States to become seriously engaged in a particular region, it needed a compelling strategic interest—a reason to invest political attention, resources, and diplomatic or military energy. That was precisely the challenge we faced with Georgia. We had to demonstrate that there was something worth engaging with - a country whose independence and stability could contribute to a wider strategic purpose. And we had to keep demonstrating it, again and again. Sometimes it felt as though we were barking day and night simply to remind the world that we existed. But the effort mattered.

Now I find myself asking questions that I would prefer not to have to ask. Where is Georgia today? On whose strategic agenda does it appear? Does it still occupy a meaningful place in Washington's calculations? In Brussels? In the broader European security debate? Or are we gradually becoming a country whose geography remains important but whose political voice is increasingly difficult to hear? I do not know the answers. I am watching from the outside, without access to the details and nuances that might provide a more reassuring picture. But what I see and hear does not always encourage optimism.

The Price of Becoming Peripheral

There is another aspect of the problem that troubles me. Georgia's present political rhetoric toward its Western partners hardly makes the task of maintaining international support easier. Repeated references to a supposed global war party, accusations involving the deep state, and the portrayal of European institutions as hostile forces raise a question that deserves serious consideration. What happens when a country whose security and international position have long depended, in significant measure, on Western engagement begins treating its Western partners as political adversaries?

I am not suggesting that Western governments would abandon Georgia simply because they dislike the rhetoric of its current authorities. International relations are not conducted on the basis of personal affection. Strategic interests do not disappear because of political disagreements. But neither are political relationships infinitely elastic. Trust matters. Predictability matters. The ability to communicate a coherent national purpose matters. And even longstanding partners' patience cannot necessarily be taken for granted.

What concerns me is the possibility that Georgia could gradually become less central to Western diplomatic calculations at precisely the moment when Russia is seeking to expand the scope of negotiations over European security. Again, that does not mean we should abandon normalcy in our relations with Russia, but we also need to consider the price of those “improved relations”. There is a distinction worth emphasising here. A country does not have to be formally abandoned to become strategically marginalised. It may simply stop commanding the sustained attention needed to protect its interests when difficult compromises are being considered.

Equally troubling to me are occasional statements from Moscow suggesting that Georgia is now behaving appropriately. Perhaps such statements are merely tactical. Perhaps they are intended to influence domestic Georgian politics or exploit disagreements between Tbilisi and its Western partners. But I find it difficult to hear expressions of satisfaction from Moscow without asking what, precisely, has earned that satisfaction. That question is not an accusation. It is a concern born of experience.

The Georgian Dilemma

At the heart of these reflections lies a dilemma that has accompanied Georgia throughout its modern independence. How can a small country pursue its dominant Western orientation, strengthen its democratic institutions, and integrate more closely into Euro-Atlantic structures without exposing itself to another potentially disastrous confrontation with Russian power? This tension between identity and security has never been easy to resolve. Nor can it be dismissed through slogans.

Geography imposes constraints. History imposes burdens. Russia's military capabilities and its demonstrated willingness to use force are realities that responsible Georgian policymakers cannot ignore. But recognising those realities is not the same as accepting that Georgia's sovereign choices should be subject to Moscow's approval. For more than three decades, we have tried, with varying degrees of success, to reconcile these imperatives. We sought to make Georgia predictable, rational, pragmatic, trustworthy, and useful to its international partners, while preserving its sovereign right to determine its own future. I believed that the fundamental choice concerning Georgia's international orientation had been made more than three decades ago.

Today, I find myself wondering whether we are being asked to make it all over again. And perhaps the most unsettling part is that the challenge no longer comes exclusively from outside our borders. The country's Western orientation faces political opposition within Georgia itself, while Russia continues to oppose the expansion of Western institutions into what it regards as its privileged sphere of influence. These are not identical phenomena, and they should not be confused. But together they complicate an already precarious strategic predicament.

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Let me return to the hypothetical scenario with which I began. Suppose the great powers do eventually reach some broader understanding concerning European security. Suppose, in the process, they distinguish between matters they regard as indispensable and others they consider negotiable. What strategic weight would Georgia carry in such calculations? Would its sovereignty, security, and freedom of choice be treated as principles that must be protected? Or might Georgia be regarded as a secondary issue, something to be handled through an accommodation with Moscow? Could we find ourselves in a situation where the most consequential decisions affecting our future are made without our

participation? Or, worse still, could some participants conclude that Georgia's geopolitical destination has already been determined and that there is little left to discuss? These are disturbing questions. I do not claim to know that any such scenario is being contemplated. I have no evidence of a secret bargain over Georgia, and I do not wish to manufacture one through speculation. But the possibility of a renewed great-power approach to spheres of influence is sufficiently consequential to warrant attention.

The world is passing through a period of profound uncertainty. The international order is being tested, old assumptions are being questioned, and familiar geopolitical instincts are reappearing in unfamiliar circumstances. Small countries have always been especially vulnerable during such transitions. Georgia knows this from experience. We also know that vulnerability does not necessarily mean helplessness. Much of our diplomatic history since independence has been an effort to demonstrate that a small country can possess strategic relevance beyond its size, provided it understands its interests, communicates them effectively, and works consistently to sustain international relationships.

As an outsider, I do not know whether today's Georgian diplomacy is making that case successfully. I hope it is. I hope, too, that my fears concerning the possible consequences of great-power bargaining will prove exaggerated, perhaps even entirely unfounded. Nothing would please me more. But I cannot forget the lessons of the years when Georgia struggled to make itself heard. Nor can I entirely silence the old professional instinct that tells me that, whenever the powerful begin discussing the future of international security, the smaller countries should pay particularly close attention.

And so I return to the question that gave this essay its title. For whom does the Georgian bell toll? For those who are negotiating the future of European security? For those responsible for Georgia's present and future? Or for all of us who once believed that our country's fundamental geopolitical choice had finally been made? I do not know. But I can hear the bell. And I would rather raise a false alarm than discover, too late, that we had stopped listening.



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