

Contemporary international relations and Georgia's possible response: challenges, risks, answers

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Image: <https://arts.cmb.ac.lk/ir/index.php/2019/11/27/certificate-course-in-international-relations-ccir-2020-intake/>

The end of WWI and, later, the 21st century itself created quite a few mind twisters in international relations. The number of unanswered questions has significantly increased, and the number of clear and unambiguous answers has decreased. As a result, global politics have fallen hostage to extremely risky initiatives and decisions, and the very basis of the world order and international stability has shattered and become dangerously vulnerable. In addition, as if the boiling temperature of global affairs was not enough, the current pandemic has cornered the practitioners and researchers of international relations and is pushing them to make quick decisions under considerable *Zeitnot*.

Yet the need for a large-scale rearrangement is not new. Every multinational or global crisis is a form of creative destruction, so to speak, and results in the emergence of something new which

in some places is positive but in others not. This assumption can be proven by naming just a few of these “destructions”. In the United States, for example, the Great Depression was followed by the New Deal that ultimately prepared the country for WW2. In turn, the subsequent Allied victory and the outbreak of the Cold War led to the establishment of a new and durable international system based upon the Bretton Woods system. More recently, the Great Recession of 2008-09, the Eurozone crisis, Brexit and the rise of populism are also threatening to overturn the world order, replacing illusory hopes and amorphous ideals with more pragmatic rationalism and realism.

It is a fact that, in our post-COVID world, global assessments will be based upon new sets of priorities and criteria. Managing international relations with relatively new emerging actors such as transnational corporations will encourage a new re-evaluation of the roles and influence of nation states and bring them to fore. At this stage of history, the repetition of ‘nationalism’ is deservedly the focus of special attention since, compared to previous centuries, when relations between states played the dominant role in the formation of global processes, our current military, political, economic, technological, human and informational resources are diametrically different. Even the so-called ‘first wave’ created more than enough mind twisters for superpowers, regional powers, medium actors and small nations alike. I will also repeat that the problems of the emerging new world order are compounded by the difficult inheritance of the many unanswered and unsolved challenges of the Cold War period.

The second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic is increasingly being discussed, which is extremely alarming due to the geo-political and geo-economic consequences it will have. It could be said that a certain form of symbiosis pushed academic and research circles to suggest new experimental solutions, whereas decision-makers were left facing a wide and often unorthodox choice. Practically speaking, the crisis of 2008, the kaleidoscope of America’s domestic and foreign policies, turbulence in the Eurozone and China’s ambition to achieve Eurasian hegemony have laid the foundation for a deep and irreversible rearrangement of contemporary international relations.

As a country in a complicated region at the crossroads of bilateral and often mutually exclusive interests, it is therefore vital that we never lose sight of current threats and that we regularly prepare ourselves for tomorrow’s risks. Georgia must develop a series of preventive measures based upon the knowledge and competence that are necessary for the country to successfully continue to develop as a nation and as a state, and must closely monitor ongoing developments in her neighborhood and beyond with the goal of maintaining freedom and stability in the region. Such preparations should have begun a long time ago, but halting them today would be a quasi-criminal form of negligence.

The aftershocks of great geo-political rearrangements

A comprehensive list of these would obviously be quite long. Our aim, however, is to identify those important problems which might not only influence a specific country or region, but also transform our current system, or perhaps even create a new one, thereby leading to the

establishment of a new world order. There is a widespread belief that discussing this question must first of all begin with the United States, and in this regard we will not be an exception, for we are not only talking out of curiosity and academic interest. The geopolitical positioning of this super-state is of pivotal importance in the context of global relations, and indeed dictates the focus and calibration of Georgia's national interests.

Since its triumph over the Soviet Union, Washington has always struggled to build a new set of consistent and feasible rules for the post-Cold War era. The elimination of the Warsaw Pact without direct kinetic conflict and the establishment of a *Pax Americana* led to the euphoria of a Cold War victory as well as overly optimistic expectations regarding our world's future development. In this regard, just mentioning Fukuyama's *The End of History and The Last Man* would be enough proof of the unrelenting movement of the wheel of history along a more idealist path, far from reality. The feeling was that all the obstacles to the expansion of the liberal order had finally been removed, and that nothing would prevent the emergence of new members in its orbit. But for the sake of objectiveness, it should be pointed out that this process was certainly not mere feeling and perception: its successful accomplishment is manifest in the eastwards expansion of NATO and the European Union.

It is also a fact that this process was accompanied by certain specificities of that period, but discussing the latter here would lead us astray from the main point. The prime message here is that the absence of any real resistance confused Western democracies as they sought to identify precise tasks, and later hampered the accumulation of the resources needed in order to achieve these aims. This was perhaps most clearly revealed during the presidency of George W. Bush, especially in the aftermath of 9-11. This date was a turning point for American foreign policy, whose main characteristic has been the intensity of U.S. involvement in various military conflicts and campaigns. In short, the task of the presidential administrations that followed became achieving total security with the help of a wider structural and intellectual format, whose primary element is direct and immediate local military involvement alongside social engineering and nation-building in authoritarian states or even in countries with experience of state building.

Many contemporary American experts believe that this choice was a big mistake, since it has led to several fundamentally negative consequences such as the disconnection between goals and resources; serious attacks on universal ideals and the principles of freedom and democracy; giving populist and antidemocratic forces (exploiting differences in color and identity) a unique opportunity to artificially spark and lead anti-American and anti-Western campaigns; etc. These processes have slowly but surely laid the foundations for the changes which we are faced with nowadays.

In this minor historical retrospective, it is important to mention that even during the Obama administration, i.e. before Trump, the American government was trying to reconcile the foreign message of 'No, we don't want that' with the domestic 'Yes, we can'. It is no coincidence that Obama has been described as an 'ideological liberal with conservative character'. The eclectic nature of this phrase could be explained by the fact that the Obama administration finally rejected

direct military involvement in local conflicts. Obama was sometimes quite controversial in this regard, at first decreasing and later increasing U.S. military forces in the hot spots of the Middle East, and officially distinguishing between America's 'essential strategic' and 'peripheral' interests. Many observers mocked this policy as 'neither war nor peace', and it is true that announcing a 'red line' in Syria and then doing nothing about it justifies this quip. But the main message here is different: the U.S. began to consider the possibility of reducing America's responsibility to 'transform the world' to an absolute minimum long before Trump's policy of 'America First'.

Today's political and historical context

The historical context can really help us to understand big issues; without it, the object of our discussion would have been torn out and incomplete. Current affairs such as increased U.S. military spending and unsuccessful attempts at 'state building' in certain regions, and most importantly the American people's confusion regarding their country's foreign policy and mission as well as the pandemic and the economic crisis it is causing have led to heated debate between the adherents of traditional U.S. foreign policy and the proponents of a 21st-century isolationism.

The latter formulation is not totally justified, but it essentially resonates with Donald Trump's political line, which preaches that the U.S should spend more on its own national agenda and only go beyond it in case of special needs dictated by American interests. (This 'U-turn towards itself' is also supported by the country's perfect location for self-defense: as a French diplomat once put it, the United States are 'surrounded by weak countries to the North and South, and by fish to the West and East'.) Yet this political trend is multifaceted and has several important exceptions, whose general characteristics and attributes I shall now discuss.

Some experts and researchers have recently been calling more frequently for the establishment of a doctrine of 'offshore balance' in foreign policy, whose essence, in short, is that in order to further the country's interests while avoiding extra expenses and risk, the United States will withdraw from the balance of regional powers. More precisely, in order to act in their strategic or tactical interests in a specific region, the United States will rely upon a local ally or allies and will only intervene militarily if the latter fail to stop an undesirable country (from the American point of view) from establishing its own hegemony over the region.

In practical terms, America's allies must deal with regional security issues themselves while Washington supplies them with intelligence and financial and logistical aid - everything, in a word, short of a military presence. This doctrine is nothing new, however, and was included in the political agenda by Senator Taft shortly after the end of the Second World War; but Taft and his supporters were unable to create a convincing analogue to the 'offshore balance doctrine' at that time, and following Eisenhower's victory in the presidential elections of 1952 and the dislocation of the American military contingent in Europe under the NATO umbrella, this doctrine in any case lost its relevance.

From a practical point of view, Trump's determination to refocus the foreign vector of the United States is fundamentally changing regional distributions of power (and possibly even on a global scale). The results of this approach include a distancing from the challenges of a Western hemisphere exclusively 'secured' by the Monroe doctrine; the creation of a safety belt based upon regional or situational partners on condition of fewer threats and expenses for Americans; getting rid of 'free riders' of America's safety guarantees; shifting the main expenses towards regional partners; avoiding excessive and useless military conflicts; and U.S. withdrawal from 'unnatural' alliances.

This briefly depicted foreign policy course is backed up by its own theoretical platform known as 'realism'. Realists do not hide their dissatisfaction with current geopolitics and America's position, and call for a fundamental revision. In order to better explain the idea behind foreign policy realism, I will name a few examples capable of explaining cardinal changes as well as mechanisms for the pragmatic development of a Georgian action plan.

Realists, both theorists and practitioners, believe that America's domination of the Western hemisphere should remain untouched; that the direct military involvement of the U.S. or regional partners is acceptable in confrontation with China; that Carter's doctrine of 'attachment to the Middle East's oil' should end and be replaced with a maneuvering of forces among regional powers; that the experiment of 'building' Afghanistan must end; that Syria's 'periphery' dictates Russian responsibility; that Saudi Arabia and the UAE are deterrents to Iran in the region; that unconditional support of Israel must end; that the countries of Europe should be responsible for their own security; and that the collective security systems that followed the Second World War must be revised.

'Realism' as a carrier of threat?

Every coin has two sides, and what we are dealing with here does too. It is one thing to understand the dissatisfaction of U.S. leaders with the current situation and their desire to change things, but it is another to soberly assess how such a revision could either strengthen global order and security or instead make things worse. This is especially thought-provoking for us, since it is quite possible that a change in global relations could create even more mind-twisters for us, and that our theories would hardly be compatible with reality.

That said, I personally believe in the realistic, rational, technocratic approach. Realism implies uncompromised thinking and an assessment of issues which rejects groundless hopes and illusory ideals. But here, too, we must remember that realism maintains that power remains central to political life and that the main concern of states is their own security, and that they must first of all rely upon their own resources instead of international norms and mechanisms.

Alongside its sober rationality and pragmatism, this form of realism does of course have its own side-effects, e.g. the dangerous rise of nationalism in international relations; using international judicial norms and orders to further an unhealthy state ego; and (unintentional?) pessimism when

it comes to multilateral efforts to make the world a better, fairer and safer place. We will add here as well that, in terms of materialization, too, a new course towards an ‘offshore balance’ has quite a few faults and weaknesses which challenge its effective implementation both for the United States as well as for her regional partners.

Studying and analyzing these faults in detail would be important from our point of view, but we must unfortunately limit ourselves to a more general description and instead discuss this issue in detail some place else. At this stage, in any case, it is very difficult to predict whether the world will follow the path of cardinal rearrangements, whether traditional forms of inter-state relations will be maintained, or whether the post-pandemic world will offer us something new.

Be that as it may, at this stage Georgia should begin to analyse and model different scenarios and develop a response to every possible one. Precise prognosis is difficult, but the margin of error of these studies must be reduced to a minimum. It is equally important that the responses not be mere reactions but proactive, responsible and balanced, especially with regard to regional arrangements. Georgia must not only ‘fit’ into the post-pandemic world order, but wherever feasible also mold the order around us by participating in the process of defining its contours.

A more general discussion of the Georgian case

Any discussion of Georgia in this context must be neither too general nor too detailed, and I shall try to find a sensible medium between these two undesirable extremes. According to modern Western teaching of foreign policy, the U.S. are the largest single contributor, and this indeed seems perfectly right and logical, but any world map of geopolitical actors identifies not one but several centers of power and gravity.

These are Europe, China and the region which we refer to as the Near East, whereas Western political vocabulary refers to it as the Middle East. Despite the usual geographical clichés and stereotypes, I obviously think that all three are important and relevant for Georgia, since what goes on in Europe, China or the Middle East affects our country’s domestic and foreign policy. Some might think that this assumption is somewhat exaggerated, but I believe that it is absolutely accurate. At this stage, we should of course not try to find explanations for our ‘uniqueness’ or ‘historic mission’, as any such attempts are hardly serious and make us lose the valuable grip of *Realpolitik*. We should instead search for the real explanation in the specifics of the region in which Georgia is located, but once again I cannot describe different theories and geo-strategic teachings at length in this format.

I have discussed these issues earlier, but I feel I should repeat and underline one of them again, the most important one for us: establishing the global actors of Eurasia as leading forces and the global results linked to this process. I will also add that the micro-region of the Black and Caspian seas is one of the knots of Eurasian strategic space; more precisely, the area of which Georgia is one of the centers—with access to the sea, and neighboring with Russia, Europe and NATO’s eastern flank as well as with the Middle East. Georgia’s geographic and geo-political location is a destiny

that can be a blessing when used properly and a curse due to the constant threats. Our principal foreign policy course adds itself to that, and as a result the entire palette of the ‘Georgian case’ is presented.

We already know that Georgia’s National Security Council announced that it was to begin work on a conceptual paper. I expect that working on this paper and discussing it will be an inclusive process, giving us the possibility to assess all the risks properly and to recommend ways of neutralizing or minimizing them. I would also like to share my opinions on a couple of circumstances and factors which I believe are important.

One of these is the possibility of establishing Georgia as a keystone state in the region, but I have recently spoken of this matter quite widely and will therefore only touch upon a few of its nodal components.

First of all, it should be mentioned that this status is not linked to any formal recognition. In reality, this role indicates the country’s functional usefulness for its allies and partners as well as its contribution to regional security and stability. However, before we consider the question of regional contribution, we should not forget that Georgia herself needs support for her national security and stable development. Some practical mechanisms for this do exist, and here of course the ultimate one would be Georgian membership of NATO’S collective security system, but the problem is the absence of clarity from NATO regarding the question of further expansion.

It is true that in recent years several important steps have been taken in the rapprochement between NATO and Georgia, especially in the Black Sea, but a feeling of dissatisfaction remains and against the background of fast-changing events is linked to the absence of commensurately fast ideas and decisions. On the other hand, the Black and Caspian Sea micro-region, as one of the knots of Eurasia, deserves much more attention and resources. On the path towards better security, another mechanism is Georgia’s bilateral defense pact with the U.S., particularly since it could coincide with the above-mentioned doctrines of realism and ‘offshore balance’. Equally acceptable and more tactical in nature would be so-called intermediate scenarios such as agreements providing for the visits of allied armed forces. Analogues of this specific step can be found in practice, and their mission is mainly linked to joint intensive training. In short, there are ways, but all this requires more thought and most importantly action in order to remain a step forward of current events. In this regard I am still left with a feeling of disappointment.

I would also mention Georgia’s regional diplomacy, including second-level diplomacy, its establishment as a hub, as well as the country becoming one of the main contributors to knowledge and information databases in the region. Both these circumstances could also be seen as contributing to the development of Georgian ‘soft power’.

I would also emphasize Georgia’s potential place in the rearranged global chain of supply and demand, which we see as a precondition for rethinking the country’s economic sovereignty and long-term development. I already have already discussed this question in the past.

Georgian-American relations: a solid precondition for development

There is a general consensus that Georgian-U.S. relations are developing dynamically and in practically every sphere. That said, I would still focus upon the military aspect and security issues in general, of which the American approach to Georgia (as a country not part of NATO) can serve as a good illustration. On the July 6, 2016, for example, Georgia and the United States signed a memorandum of understanding on deepening their partnership in defense and security spheres, which later became a framework agreement for cooperation in 2016-19 and was renewed on November 21, 2019. This agreement defines the two countries' strategic partnership and defines priorities for mutual cooperation with the aim of improving defense readiness and levels of compatibility. Logically speaking, neither political nor economic ties fall behind the increasing dynamics of security which was specially underlined in the assessments dedicated to the 10th anniversary of the strategic partnership. This process of productive cooperation gives rise to the hope of even more interesting perspectives, especially in our unpredictable modern world and region. The wish to develop multilateral links through somewhat non-standardized and sometimes brand-new decisions and approaches is also linked to this hope. This is why the recent assessments published by a party group of the U.S. congress caused such surprise, not only because they were far removed from reality but also because they cast a shadow over the two countries' main achievement. To quote the U.S. ambassador in Tbilisi, '[our] strategic partnership with Georgia has never been as strong as it is today'.

Large-scale change is never a simple process; this is something that we all understand, and we should be just as understanding whenever assessments of change differ. But we must always remember that, in our assessments, it is very important that we never unintentionally damage our high-level relations with well-wishing partners. Achieving this level of relations has required enormous efforts over several generations, and maintaining them will require many more. In this regard, we must always remain objective when evaluating external events and actors and be twice as critical and demanding towards ourselves. Our country's 'grand strategy' should also provide a concrete guide to Georgian 'realism' and provide guiding principles which could ensure that the 'strategy' is in constant development and capable of responding to specific moments in history and concrete national interests.