

The Next US Administration And Georgia

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Under the next US administration, the general approach to the South Caucasus and Georgia in particular will see little change, as US strategic interests in the region prevail over some of the the past years' foreign policy inconsistencies and the growing disparity between America and the regional powers. After all, continuity in the US approach toward the South Caucasus has been the general pattern of US diplomacy since the 1990s.

There will be troubles too, though. The US is decreasing its military presence in the Middle East and Afghanistan, and has been, if not overly isolationist, then more inward-looking in the past several years. It might take some time for the US to rewind its active involvement in Georgia and the South Caucasus at large. Indeed, it is not only about winding down operation in Afghanistan: China's economic and military growth will continue to attract much of Washington's attention. Greater competition between China and the US will follow, and in many respects, the next four years will be decisive. It requires attention from US policy-makers and national resources to be moved away from Western Eurasia and more towards the Indo-Pacific region.

Though Georgia has traditionally enjoyed US economic and military aid, it is still vulnerable to the changing global geopolitical landscape. Georgia fears that in the long term, the recalibration of US foreign policy could spell trouble, as Tbilisi's aspirations for NATO membership and therefore national security, have traditionally hinged on close relations with Washington.

Still, for the next four years, some basic US interests in Georgia will persist. One of the imperatives of the US policy since the breakup of the Soviet Union was to enable governments in Tbilisi to use the country's geographic position as a nodal point in the nascent South Caucasus energy and transport corridor. The effectiveness of the Georgian corridor also underpins a bigger vision, i.e. the Trans-Caspian Corridor, which, under improved circumstances, could turn into a geopolitical reality. This would inevitably increase Georgia's independence vis-à-vis Russian transportation networks, and create an alternative route for the Caspian states.

In the next four years, we could also see Georgia having to choose between two techno-economic blocks which are being created across Eurasia: one associated with the US, another increasingly with China. Georgian leaders would have to walk a diplomatic tightrope, keen not to draw ire from China, while preserving ties to the West. But as America's stance on China hardens, it will be more difficult to maintain this balance. Georgia, with its geographic position, will be growingly seen as yet another divisive issue. Navigating Georgia to avoid entanglements with China and sticking closely to Western standards and trade practices will be a hallmark of the US foreign policy.

In a way, the balancing act will prove unsustainable. Georgia's NATO and EU membership aspirations, the cornerstone of its geopolitical orientation, as well as other issues, will drive a wedge between Georgia and China. Other countries' experience shows the trend, as the US diplomatic offensive proved successful in Europe in limiting the 5G network operation by Chinese telecom giants.

True that at this point, criticizing China openly would cost Georgia a lot, but as tensions ratchet up between the West and China, Georgia will have to pick sides openly and vocally, though strategically it has already done so in favor of the West.