The changing role of U.S. diplomacy in Georgia: 1991 – 2015

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Introduction

Georgia has navigated a turbulent and uncertain path since its independence in 1991. Its position at the crossroads of East and West has prompted sustained U.S. diplomatic engagement, aimed at supporting a stable democracy independent of Russian influence. From 1991 to 2015, U.S. diplomacy in Georgia remained guided by consistent core objectives, even as its methods adjusted to shifting political, economic, and security conditions. For most of its modern independence, Georgia was Western-oriented and relatively stable, but in recent years, it has become more authoritarian and hostile to the West.

Conversations with former U.S. ambassadors to Georgia revealed that in the 1990s, the country was weak and vulnerable. Ambassador Kenneth Yalowitz (1998-2001) said that Georgia—alongside Tajikistan—was among the countries he viewed as most at risk of complete state failure. The scale of Georgia's early post-independence crisis was profound. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the country experienced an estimated 75 percent drop in GDP[1] while simultaneously confronting violent separatist movements and civil war, resulting in the ethnic cleansing and displacement of hundreds of thousands of Georgians.[2]

It was in this environment of uncertainty that U.S. diplomacy in Georgia began to take shape. Across the five ambassadors I interviewed and the multiple administrations under which they served, the main objective of U.S. diplomacy in Georgia was remarkably unchanged: nudge Georgia toward democracy and anchor it in a free-market economy. The tactics shifted at times, but the goal did not. In many ways, the U.S. expected Georgia to grow into something grander: an example of how democracy and a market economy could transform a country after communism.

Eduard Shevardnadze, Foreign Minister of the USSR and then President of Georgia, and President Bill Clinton (1994), The William Clinton Presidential Library

Early Market Reforms

Ambassador William Courtney (1995–1997) cited extreme poverty and Russian pressure as Georgia's primary challenges during his tenure. These conditions left the country economically fragile and vulnerable to outside influence. In response, the U.S. provided substantial humanitarian aid, including wheat shipments to alleviate food insecurity. Amb. Courtney also focused on advancing privatization in Georgia to "get the government out of the economy as much as possible." However, these early market reforms in the mid-1990s, particularly price liberalization, privatization, and tax reform, were undermined by weak implementation.

According to the International Monetary Fund's analyses, the Georgian government lacked the institutional strength to enforce new policies. Tax collection was extremely low, regulatory systems were underdeveloped, and corruption was widespread. Stabilization efforts, including inflation control and a new currency, were also undermined by fiscal instability and poor governance.[3]

Despite these challenges, the U.S. developed a long-term strategic foothold in Georgia. While economic reforms did not progress as quickly as intended, their early introduction was critical. These initial efforts laid the institutional and economic groundwork that, after 2003, would later enable deeper reforms and sustained Western engagement in the region.

Ambassador William Courtney (1992), U.S. Department of State

Confronting Corruption

When I spoke with Ambassador Kenneth Yalowitz (1998–2001), a different perspective emerged, particularly on corruption in Georgia. To a greater extent than Amb. Courtney, who had previously served in Kazakhstan, Amb. Yalowitz viewed corruption as a central challenge. Amb. Courtney's experience in Kazakhstan's oil-based economy had exposed him to corruption on a larger, more systemic scale, making what he encountered in Georgia appear more limited by comparison.

A second explanation for why corruption stood out more in Amb. Yalowitz's assessment may be tied to Georgia's economic trajectory. By the late 1990s, Georgia had made progress in stabilizing its economy and meeting many International Monetary Fund targets, reflecting a degree of U.S.-backed success in supporting market reforms. However, as Georgia's focus shifted from privatization to the functioning of the new economic system, corruption undermined these gains and became a direct obstacle to implementing the new economic system.

A key example of Amb. Yalowitz's efforts to combat corruption in Georgia was his initiative to establish an American Chamber of Commerce (AmCham). U.S. investors were increasingly interested in entering the Georgian market, but pervasive corruption made it difficult for American businesses to do so. Amb. Yalowitz saw the creation of an AmCham as a way to unify American firms, allowing them to advocate collectively against unfair business practices, which had previously forced companies to relinquish ownership. AmCham quickly became an important force in shaping Georgia's business environment, promoting transparency, and Western business standards.[4]

Pankisi Gorge Crisis

Despite advances in economic diplomacy, Georgia soon faced mounting external pressure that tested not only the scope of U.S. engagement, but also the future of its democracy. By 1999, Amb. Yalowitz was increasingly confronted with renewed Russian assertiveness in the region, particularly over Chechnya. This dynamic contributed to the Pankisi Gorge crisis (2000–2002), when Chechen fighters and refugees involved in the Chechen insurgency against Russian forces crossed into Georgia, prompting Russian aircraft to drop bombs into the Pankisi Gorge. This constituted a direct challenge to Georgia's sovereignty.

For the United States, this moment marked a shift from primarily economic support to a more security-focused form of diplomacy. In response to the crisis, the U.S. expanded its involvement through security assistance, most notably with the 2002 Georgia Train-and-Equip Program (GTEP). Under this initiative, the Department of Defense deployed roughly 100–200 U.S. special operations forces and committed $64 million to strengthen the Georgian Armed Forces.[5] GTEP was successful in strengthening Georgia's capacity to address internal security threats and deter further Russian encroachment in the Pankisi gorge.

Ambassador Kenneth Yalowitz (2012), U.S. Department of State

The U.S. transformed Georgia's military into a more professional, capable, and interoperable force. GTEP positioned Georgia as a capable partner in international missions, which Georgian leaders viewed as important to their goal of NATO membership. Beginning in 2003, Georgia deployed troops to Iraq and contributed to the war in Afghanistan from 2004 to 2021. These deployments were not just symbolic. Georgia became the largest non-NATO and per capita contributor to NATO's International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, and the third-largest contributor to coalition forces in the 2003 Iraq War.[6] Georgia used its military contributions as a diplomatic tool, reinforcing its strategic partnership with the U.S. while advancing its long-term goal of NATO integration.

Pankisi Gorge (2011), Aleksey Muhranoff

The Rose Revolution

As Georgia's military aligned with the West, broader Georgian society was undergoing a similar shift. This transformation became especially visible during the 2003 parliamentary elections, which many Georgians viewed as an opportunity to democratize further. However, when the results appeared to favor President Eduard Shevardnadze's party amid credible allegations of fraud, public frustration intensified. Beginning on November 3, 2003, large-scale, nonviolent protests erupted, led by a coalition of opposition figures—including Mikheil Saakashvili, Nino Burjanadze, and Zurab Zhvania—who coordinated closely throughout the crisis. This became known as the Rose Revolution, after which Saakashvili became president, Zhvania became prime minister, and Burjanadze served as interim president before later becoming speaker of parliament.[7]

To better understand the U.S. role during this period, I asked Ambassador Richard Miles (2002–2005) how the United States approached the situation. He emphasized that it was not the U.S.'s role to help the opposing Mikheil Saakashvili overturn the election results. Instead, the priority was maintaining stability. Ambassador Miles spent significant time talking to various leaders about not resorting to violence.

Beyond efforts to prevent escalation, the U.S. worked to strengthen the underlying conditions for free and fair elections before any voting took place. Through USAID, the U.S. supported initiatives like voter roll modernization and broader election capacity-building, including bringing in American experts to train Georgians in election administration and campaign organization. As Amb. Miles explained in an interview with the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, these efforts were deliberately nonpartisan: “It didn’t matter which political party—the government party, the opposition parties, the radical parties—we would provide training.”[8] In 2003 alone, the U.S. provided approximately $141.16 million in financial support to various democracy-building and other reform programs in Georgia.[9]

The impact of these reforms is best illustrated through Georgia’s dramatic improvement in global business rankings.[10] When Georgia was first included in the World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business Index in 2006, it ranked 100th out of 155 countries. However, over the following decade, Georgia emerged as one of the world’s top reformers, rising to 8th place in 2013 and 7th in 2019.[11] Although the World Bank has since replaced this index with its Business Ready (B-READY) framework, Georgia’s strong performance has continued. As of 2025, Georgia ranks 4th globally.[12]

Tens of thousands of protesters gathered in front of the Tbilisi Sakrebulo Hall during the Rose Revolution (2003), Author Unknown

Ambassador Richard Miles (2003), Tech. Sgt. Andy Dunaway, U.S. Air Force

2008

By 2008, the U.S. supported Georgia's path toward NATO integration. At the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit, the U.S. advocated for Georgia to be granted a Membership Action Plan (MAP), a necessary step towards Georgia's accession to NATO.[13] The MAP process would strengthen Georgia's military capability and interoperability with other allied countries. The alliance ultimately declined to offer Georgia a Membership Action Plan due to opposition from several member states who feared provoking Russia.[14]

On August 8, 2008,[15] Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Georgia, igniting Europe's first war of the 21st century. Russia cited the need to protect residents of South Ossetia following escalating clashes with Georgian forces, though the invasion also occurred against the backdrop of growing Russian opposition to Georgia's pursuit of NATO membership. Although the U.S. had successfully transformed Georgia into a capable and committed partner, it was ultimately unable to guarantee its security in the face of direct Russian military action.

Georgian police (left) and Russian soldiers, evacuating destroyed tank after Russian-Georgian war (2008), Matti&Keti, and Beso Kalandadse

Destroyed apartment houses after air raid of Russian army in Gori, Georgia (2008), Matti&Keti, and Beso Kalandadse

The Aftermath

In the aftermath of the war, Georgia's economy deteriorated rapidly as investor confidence collapsed in its heavily FDI-dependent system, where inflows had accounted for 17.2% of GDP in 2007.[16] I spoke with Ambassador John Bass (2009-2012), who arrived as the country was receiving the second portion of a $1 billion U.S. aid package. Amb. Bass' role focused on allocating that aid to support government reforms. This post-war support helped Georgia withstand the global financial crisis, while many European countries were forced to cut spending and faced intense public dissatisfaction during the economic downturn.

Yet, economic stabilization did not resolve the underlying security challenges that emerged from the war. Russia had recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. Although President Bush condemned Russia, imposed sanctions, and provided Georgia with aid, the American response ultimately signaled that Russia's actions would carry limited consequences.[17]

Amb. Bass explained that the U.S. was hesitant to provide certain military support to Georgia after the war, due in part to concerns that Russia might overreact.

Ambassador John Bass (left) with Georgian Prime Minister Nika Gilauri (2011), Embassy of the U.S. to Georgia

For example, Georgia sought long-range missile defense systems that could reach Russian territory, a capability the U.S. was unwilling to provide. While avoiding Russian escalation was one factor in the decision not to provide Georgia with this technology, Amb. Bass also emphasized that Georgia lacked the infrastructure and capacity to operate such advanced systems effectively. The issue, therefore, was not only strategic risk, but also practical readiness. Georgia lacked the maintenance systems or operational experience required to sustain that level of military technology.

In 2009, Georgia increased its troop contributions in Afghanistan, resulting in some Georgian units gaining counterinsurgency experience. For the U.S., this approach offered a strategic way to strengthen Georgia's defense capabilities and interoperability with NATO while minimizing the risk of escalating tensions with Russia.

The Ivanishvili Divide

Amb. Bass was succeeded by Ambassador Richard Norland (2012-2015). Amb. Norland's goals were the same as his predecessors': to help Georgia maintain its course toward western integration and democracy, with a stronger emphasis on protecting Georgia from further Russian occupation.

These goals became harder to pursue as political tensions rose in Georgia. In the country's first peaceful transfer of power, the opposition Georgian Dream party, led by Bidzina Ivanishvili, soundly defeated Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement party. Although a democratic milestone, this transition of power raised concerns. Washington had expected Saakashvili to remain in power, so Ivanishvili's victory created uncertainty. After years of working closely with Saakashvili and the United National Movement, some U.S. officials were quick to accept its allegations about Ivanishvili's ties to Russian leadership. Ivanishvili's prior Russian citizenship and the wealth he had accumulated there also did little to ease these concerns. This made it difficult to convey Ivanishvili's stated plans for Georgia's future to Washington officials, as they were initially reluctant to take them at face value.

There were two dominant views of Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili. Critics at the time, particularly within the United National Movement, portrayed Ivanishvili as overly lenient toward Russia, labeling him a Kremlin agent seeking to pull Georgia back into Moscow's orbit. Indeed, while my analysis focuses on U.S. diplomacy in Georgia up to 2015, it is important to note that in 2024 Ivanishvili was sanctioned by the United States and several European Union countries for undermining Georgian democracy and advancing Russian interests.[18]

Ambassador Norland (right) meets Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili (2012), Embassy of the U.S. to Georgia

However, in 2012, there were credible reasons to view him differently.

Ivanishvili himself had previously supported and financed Mikheil Saakashvili and the reforms that followed the Rose Revolution, even donating substantial personal funds to support the Georgian state. He later justified his entry into politics as a response to what he and many others saw as Saakashvili's growing authoritarianism. In hindsight, it is clear that Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream Party ultimately strayed from democratic principles key to western integration, however it will be for historians to decide whether this reflected Ivanishvili's original intent or was a gradual shift shaped by political constraints and a desire to avoid further escalation with Russia.

In 2014, Georgia continued moving closer to Europe. In June, it signed an Association Agreement with the European Union, a step strongly supported by the U.S. that expanded trade and regulatory alignment.[19] Building on earlier U.S.-Georgia security cooperation, including training programs and deployments, Georgia also hosted a long-term U.S. Marine Corps training mission and continued contributing troops to U.S. and NATO operations in Afghanistan. By 2015, the U.S. continued to reaffirm its support for Georgia's goal of broader Euro-Atlantic integration and long-term alignment with the West.[20]

Although Georgia's trajectory would change in the years that followed, that evolution lies beyond the scope of this analysis, which focuses on the 1991–2015 period and the persistence of U.S. efforts to anchor Georgia in the West.

Conclusion

Between 1991 and 2015, the United States had the unique opportunity to play a role in shaping Georgia's trajectory, helping to stabilize the country and support its shift toward democratic governance and Western integration. Georgia is rich in its history, which spans 3,000 years, complex in its political relationships, and unique in its mentality, being shaped by both Eastern and Western influences. Few countries presented such a consequential opportunity to support democratic development at such a pivotal moment, and in that sense, U.S. diplomacy in Georgia was as much a privilege as it was an instrument of foreign policy.

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