Following the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw, it seems clear that Georgia has little chance of being granted a Membership Action Plan. However, it is evident that a business-as-usual approach towards its relationship with NATO is ill-advised. Top officials from both Georgia and NATO now need to sit down for a serious brainstorming session to iron out their differences on difficult issues and set out new guidelines for relations going forward.

Georgian leaders, the minister of defence in particular, believed that their wish to obtain a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) would be granted at one of NATO’s recent summits. However, the last eight years have exposed the eternal lack of consensus among NATO member states, starting with the infamous Summit in Bucharest where NATO’s open door policy towards Georgia was proclaimed. They have also highlighted Georgian officials’ exaggerated expectations and optimism about this issue. Following the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw, it seems clear that Georgia has little chance of being granted a MAP and, as a result, the country remains in limbo. Furthermore, were Georgia to be offered a substitute for a MAP by NATO, perhaps an Associated Partnership, it would not ease the feeling of disappointment or even betrayal inside the country.

The biggest question that remains unanswered by both Georgian and NATO officials is the nature of relations between the two after the Warsaw Summit. Will Georgian officials realise that Georgia is a close “partner” and not a NATO “mem-
ber”? That the process of membership has come to a standstill and needs to be reinvigorated but lacks new content? Or will they continue to delude themselves, as has been the case over the last eight years, in order to not lose their spirit of optimism and maintain their country’s Euro-Atlantic orientation? Will NATO speak with one voice and say loud and clear that the Alliance’s open door policy towards Georgia has failed and that the door is, in reality, shut? Or will NATO’s ambiguity continue as if nothing has happened?

Unanswered questions

Undoubtedly, both NATO and Georgian officials are frustrated by the situation, since NATO’s words do not reflect NATO’s deeds, while Georgia’s expectations have failed to materialise. The implicit veto that Russia has over Georgia’s desire to join the Alliance hangs over that country like the Sword of Damocles, despite repeated statements by western politicians and diplomats that Russia has no such veto.

Although Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President François Hollande and United States President Barack Obama said “no” to a Georgian MAP, European NATO officials have kept a low profile, failing to clearly articulate that Georgia’s chances of receiving a MAP were, and still are, very low (likely close to zero). On the other hand, American NATO officials have been more forthcoming, since they have felt obliged to be frank, blunt and less constrained by political correctness.

On May 13th 2015 Kurt Volker, a former US Envoy to NATO, said that: “One day Georgia may become a NATO member, however, I would like to say that NATO is not discussing this issue at present.” On October 6th 2015 Volker told Voice of America that: “I do not think that Georgia and Ukraine should expect to receive a MAP at the upcoming NATO Summit in Warsaw.” Furthermore, as recently as April 22nd 2016, Douglas Lute, the US Envoy to NATO, told the Aspen Security Forum in London that: “There is no way we are going to get consensus any time in the near future on adding Georgia and Ukraine. In practical terms I do not think there is much additional room in the near term, the next several years perhaps or maybe even longer, for additional NATO expansion.”

There is no doubt whatsoever that the European leaders’ official political correctness hindered them when it came to speaking clearly on this crucial issue. At the same time, Georgian officials have made a grave mistake by not challenging
European NATO officials on the issue of a MAP or membership. By challenging them, the Georgians would have found out where both sides stand on the issue and would perhaps start to think differently. On the other hand, maintaining a calm and amicable position has not helped Georgia. In the end, their officials are left with plenty of unanswered questions and thus have a difficult task in trying to convey a clear message to ordinary Georgians.

**Disappointment and anger**

Bearing all this in mind, what can we expect from Georgian officials after the Warsaw Summit? Perhaps we will see bitter disappointment and even anger, similar to earlier statements made by Tina Khidasheli, the defence minister (Khidasheli resigned in early August 2016 – editor’s note), who said: “If the answer from Warsaw is negative, you can take my word for it, and I hate to say it, but it will have an immediate implication for Georgia’s election results.” If that is the case, then this approach is not going to help Georgia. To blame NATO for domestic shortcomings and electioneering is unwise. A better implemented domestic agenda is one of the keys to potential positive feedback from NATO. This point has often been reiterated by NATO officials.

What Georgian leaders, including the defence minister, have to understand and acknowledge is that they were the ones who failed to revise their policies and relations with NATO over the last eight years. Today, they urgently need not just revision, which is long overdue, but a whole new way of thinking, a new approach and finally, a new understanding with NATO. On the other hand, NATO is likely to be very reluctant to admit that its consistent open door policy towards Georgia has failed. Even so, NATO has to realise that its open door policy, which successfully brought Albania and Croatia into NATO in 2008 and which has recently led to Montenegro being invited to join, cannot be equalled by granting Georgia a MAP and ultimately bringing it into the Alliance. The decision to grant Georgia a MAP means that the Alliance is ready to defend Georgia against Russia, even though Georgia is not yet a member. The threat of Russia attacking Georgia cannot be underestimated and is very real.

Defending Georgia remains the most difficult issue for the Alliance to unanimously agree upon. NATO pursues a very cautious approach towards Russia, not because it is afraid of it but because it understands that confrontation with Russia would require the support of the EU population, would be very costly and would
create a heavy burden for the allied leaders to carry. These crucial points are neither explained nor understood in Georgia and, as a result, need to be conveyed and explained at length to both Georgian politicians and ordinary Georgians alike.

What is evident is that after the Warsaw Summit, the Georgian business-as-usual approach towards relations with NATO would be ill-advised. Both Georgian and NATO top officials need to sit down for a serious brainstorming session to iron out their differences on difficult issues and set out new guidelines for Georgia-NATO relations. Transparency aside, certain parts of these new guidelines should be conveyed to the Georgian public. They should receive a clear explanation as to why NATO has failed to bring Georgia into the Alliance over the last eight years. Jens Stoltenberg, the Secretary General of the Alliance, should clearly state that: “Yes, Georgia is our closest partner but is not a member, since the Alliance lacks consensus on that issue.”

Being honest with himself and with the Georgian public will help mitigate the feeling of betrayal and disenchantment that Georgians are currently feeling towards NATO. Furthermore, Stoltenberg’s statement would help counter Russia and Russian sympathisers in Georgia, who claim that: “We informed you Georgians all
along that NATO was not ready to bring you in. You never believed us and clung to the hope that the indecisive Alliance would stick to the promise it made at the Bucharest Summit back in 2008. It is time to face the facts.”

To start anew

Nevertheless, several key points outlined below should be taken into consideration when determining the best way to reset relations following the Warsaw Summit. First and foremost, Stoltenberg should state loudly and clearly that a MAP is obligatory for Georgia in order to counter comments made by Davit Usupashvili, the chairman of the Georgian parliament, and Tina Khidasheli, the now former minister of defence, who have said that: “We in Georgia do not need a MAP.” It is also of the utmost importance that the North Atlantic Council (NAC), as the principal decision-making body of NATO, reinforces Stoltenberg’s statement that a MAP is not just important but crucial for Georgia. Countries that receive a MAP are not simply Alliance aspirants, but official candidates for NATO membership. Thus, it is critical to emphasise the linkage between a MAP and membership to Georgian officials and the expert community in Georgia.

Second, discussions in Georgia about receiving a MAP should be toned down, de-politicised and the Georgian leadership should ultimately be sober-minded about the chances of Georgia quickly getting a MAP. Statements made by Khidasheli, including things like “I am not going to tone down demands” and “Georgia will demand membership at the Warsaw Summit,” do not help Georgia's case. Furthermore, it puts off those allies who have not yet made up their minds about bringing Georgia into the Alliance.

Third, there is a notion in Georgia that “We Georgians are entitled”. As a result of the country’s progress in following NATO and EU guidelines in pursuing various reforms and strengthening democracy, Georgia feels that it deserves to get NATO membership. This sense of entitlement needs to be toned down. Georgian officials need to understand that in these challenging times that Europe faces they should take nothing for granted. Instead, there needs to be a long-term approach, based on patience and resilience, to withstand difficulties along the road. For those impatient Georgians who live in the shadow of a belligerent Russia, this is easier said than done. Nevertheless, both sides need to determine how to solve the issue of strategic patience. It should also be stressed that questions such as when Georgia will receive a MAP will be asked repeatedly.

Fourth, NATO constantly praising Georgian achievements (particularly in Afghanistan) whilst at the same time pouring cold water on that country’s expec-
tations confuse and exasperate Georgians. NATO’s language of ambiguity is not understood by them, as they are a plain spoken people. Therefore, NATO officials need to be forthright.

Fifth, European and American NATO experts on strategic communications should form a link between NATO, Georgian officials and ordinary Georgians. This team of experts must have expertise in Georgian domestic, foreign and security policy and be capable of delivering concise and precise messages from NATO to Georgia and back. They also need to be fluent in Russian. This point is of utmost importance, since the team should debate NATO issues throughout Georgia, not just in the capital, Tbilisi. Knowing Georgian is an extra bonus but not a precondition. It is up to NATO and Georgian officials to agree whether or not one of the aims of this team is to counter Russian anti-NATO propaganda, as well as some of Georgia’s political anti-NATO rhetoric.

There is no guarantee that these suggestions will be seriously considered by either side. However, without a new impetus in bilateral relations, Georgia has little chance of overcoming its impasse, while NATO’s eternal lack of consensus will remain a stumbling block. The only winner in this situation will be Russia. In the end, acrimony and accusations may fly, but they do not help Georgia or NATO under the current, difficult circumstances.

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