

**COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS TALK — BY MR. DAVID GAMKRELIDZE, MP
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Thank you, Ambassador Sestanovitch, for your kind introduction, and for organizing this event. It is an honor to be here at the Council on Foreign Relations. I will speak very briefly, to ensure that most of our time can be used for questions. I am prepared to discuss any of the topics that might be on your minds, and I hope that we could in particular examine the democratic process in Georgia as it currently stands. However, in my opening remarks I wish to make a few observations about what appears as Washington's new policy toward the region, which developed post-September 11, and how this policy is impacting Georgia.

Based on my observations, influential members of Bush's team recognized that a region we might broadly call central Eurasia—starting in Ukraine, going through to the Chinese boarder in Central Asia—might very well represent the area of the new geopolitical center of US policy, the same way that Europe played this role in the 20th century. September 11 attacks gave the US an opportunity to actually implement policies which could strengthen America's position in the region. Immediately after the attacks, US set up military bases in Central Asia, but these will likely remain in the region for much longer than after the campaign in Afghanistan is fully completed. The level of financial support for the countries in the region has grown dramatically; this I think is very important and useful.

In Georgia, last Spring US began a so-called "Train and Equip Program" to train 2,000 Georgian soldiers which will form the basis of the future Georgian army. This 64 million dollar program is an exponential increase in US military support for Georgia, and one of the reasons for my trip to Washington now is ensure that this sort of a relationship continues after the program runs its course in 2004. The program is arguably the most important thing that can be done to strengthen the Georgian state, which in turn is necessary for defense of the Georgian democracy. At the same time, discussions are now underway about Georgia's likely future membership in NATO—something that was never viewed seriously three years ago. Indeed, I sponsored a resolution in the Georgian Parliament making this the principal priority of our foreign policy. Meanwhile, President Shevardnadze followed on Parliament's unanimous support of this resolution, by announcing last month that Georgia plans to seek NATO membership at the Prague summit.

The Bush Administration's strong stance in relationship to Russian pressure on Georgia is also of importance. While Presidents Bush and Vladimir Putin have clearly formed a friendship, this relationship has not stood in the Administration's

way of sending a very strong message to Russia to stop pressuring Georgia. For example, this summer and fall, Russian planes bombed Georgian territory, ostensibly as part of the war against Chechen separatists. Moscow also threatened to send forces into Georgia, in effect menacing to annex the country once again. Ultimately what stopped Russia from acting was America's unequivocal commitment to Georgia, which President Bush and other officials at highest levels expressed almost on a weekly basis in August and September. Through this policy, the Bush Administration has helped make Georgia the litmus test for Russia's new foreign policy which President Putin claims to be implementing. If he truly wishes to be what we might call "pro-Western," and no longer wishes to play the "Great Game" for the dominance of Eurasia, he can demonstrate his commitment by ending his pressure tactics on Georgia. Otherwise, it becomes clear that his commitment to this new pro-Western foreign policy is in name only.

I believe that the Administration's policies to Georgia are not accidental, and are all aimed at giving our country, and its region, a new role in global politics that goes far beyond supplying energy to Europe. There are long-term strategic US interests in the region, including influencing the Middle East and potentially needing to contain a rapidly strengthening China. Turkey has served as a key US outpost in the Middle East, but many of its internal problems, including the growing Islamic radicalism, has certainly created a need for another staunch ally geographically close to Turkey. Meanwhile, President Bush's National Security Strategy states that US will not allow any nation to even contemplating a challenge to US military dominance. This is aimed directly at China, because realistically speaking only China can contemplate a challenge to US military dominance, probably not today, but in a decade or two. Central Asia is a vital part of containing the growth of China, and there are only two routes into Central Asia for America—Pakistani-Afghanistan route, problems of which are quite clear, and the Georgia-Caspian route.

As well, there is another critical element that accounts for America's increased level of support for Georgia which has to do with democratic values. Writing in the Fall issue of the *National Interest*, Gary Schmitt argues that the Bush National Security Strategy, with its clear focus on the character of political regimes, necessitates America's constant and very strong commitment to promulgation of liberal democracy and open society around the world, because only that sort of a free regime can be viewed as a true US ally. Georgia presents a unique opportunity in the former Soviet Union to become a truly consolidated liberal democracy. Three significant accomplishments of the 1990s, each of which was

achieved with significant Western, largely American, support give me the right to say this:

- First, by all standards, Georgia has a strong and vibrant free media, both print and television. It is unfortunate that in recent months the first channel of state television has become a government mouthpiece, but the media as a whole is nonetheless open, serving as a serious check on the government.
- Second, Georgia has an influential civil society, both in the non-governmental, non-profit sector, as well as the business community.
- Third, Georgia has an open public sphere and active political parties. This is a development of recent years, since the collapse of the CUG. All of us who are associated with the New Conservative Party are very proud of our role in helping collapse a political force which suck the energy from opposition forces by completely dominating political life for much of the 1990s, in many ways like the Communist party of the old.

These three points are indications of Georgia's unique opportunity for consolidation of democracy which exists in Georgia, and given Schmitt's analysis of the Bush foreign policy vision, the increased interest in Georgia from this Administration seems sensible.

In Georgia, few have fully grasped the special opportunity that America's new policies present to our country. Some still believe that our country's role in the world should be simply to serve as an energy corridor. Certainly that is important, both for our economic well being and for our security. Still others do not want to take advantage of this opportunity because it would forever solidify the Georgian democracy and prevent certain non-democratic elements from taking hold of power in Georgia.

I believe that there is an opportunity for Georgia to become a special outpost of democracy, a country through which pro-freedom vision can be spread throughout central Eurasia region. Because Georgia presents a very good opportunity for planting and spreading the seeds of liberal democracy in Central Eurasia, the U.S. not only is willing to support our country, but also is interested in reaping the rewards from this young and growing ally. Because Georgia is surrounded by countries that are either not moving in the direction of this vision, or if moving at all, doing so very slowly, Georgia has a special opportunity to become the outpost of U.S. foreign policy and interests in central Eurasia. Of course much remains to be done to achieve this, and these are issues that I am certain will be brought forth during the discussion.