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HIIA Analysis

Regular publication of the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs.

Publisher:

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Copy editor(s): Lillian Aronson

ISSN 2416-0148

KE-2026/8

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April 14, 2026

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THE NON-ALIGNMENT OF SMALL STATES IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD ORDER? THE FINLANDIZATION OF GEORGIA AS A CASE STUDY

Several generations have grown up in Europe since the fall of the Iron Curtain, so, to many, the sovereignty of small states and the self-determination of nation-states seem to be self-evident. Yet the very existence of nation-states is a historical anomaly in itself—some two-thirds of the current 193 UN member states were still under the yoke of empires in 1945. The global American hegemony that emerged with the collapse of the Soviet Union sowed the seeds of faith in democratic cooperation among equal states worldwide, yet the illusion of a “rules-based international order” now appears to be crumbling. In a multipolar world order, the spheres of influence of great and middle powers are being reestablished, and the sovereignty of nation-states is being sidelined. This process began in Georgia 2008, and the South Caucasus nation continues to provide an exemplary case study of the geopolitical status issues facing small states: Is non-alignment possible for small states in a multipolar world order? The forced neutrality of Finlandization may offer a stable solution in the medium term, but it harbors significant risks in the long term.

THE GRAND DREAMS OF SMALL STATES

The sovereignty of nation-states, especially that of small states, is a true anomaly in world history. Today, the United Nations has 193 member states, nearly four times the 51 members it had when the organization was founded in 1945. Two-thirds of the nearly 200 member states are small states, the vast majority of which gained their independence as a result of decolonization following World War II. Currently, 56 states with voting rights in the UN General Assembly gained independence from Great Britain after 1945, 28 from France, and 18 post-Soviet and six post-socialist republics were liberated from Soviet rule. Of the 193

member states, therefore, 142 were part of empires not so long ago.¹

Although sometimes written with a capital “E,” human history is fundamentally the history of empires. Although there were even more political entities of varying sizes existing worldwide prior to the age of discovery and colonization than there are today, only a negligible fraction of these were organized along proto-national—ethnic or linguistic—lines, since in the periods preceding nation-building, the political structure of human societies across the globe was shaped primarily by dynastic or tribal ties and geographical constraints. The modern political program of nation-building culminated in the struggle for the expanded rights of folk culture and the national literary language, as well as for the independence and sovereignty of the nation-state and, from the French Revolution through the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence of 1848–49, has essentially continued to this day worldwide, from Ukraine through Kurdistan to Sudan.

Georgia’s modern history is also a history of imperial oppression and struggles for national independence. This ancient, Christian nation of just 3.7 million people lies at the crossroads of great powers and world religions. In terms of regional power dynamics, the very fact that it managed to win its independence twice in the twentieth century is a significant civilizational achievement. First, in 1918, after more than a century of Russian occupation, it declared its independence; then, in 1991, the Georgian people shook off a generation of Soviet oppression. A year later, in July 1992, Georgia became the 179th member state of the United Nations.

However, membership in an international organization does not equate to sovereignty. Belarus and Ukraine, for example, have had independent voting rights since 1945, even though they were already under direct Soviet control at that time, and Moscow continues to significantly restrict Belarus’s sovereignty to this day. India, too, was among the founding members when the United Nations was established in 1945, just as it was in the League of Nations, even though it remained a crown colony of the British Empire until 1947. Just as with Belarus or Ukraine, India’s membership served as a means for the British and Soviet empires to exercise power through vote manipulation within the multilateral institutional system.

1 Baldúr Thorhallsson, Jóna Sólveig Elínardóttir, and Anna Margarét Eggertsdóttir, “A Small State’s Campaign to Get Elected to the UNSC: Iceland’s Ambitious Failed Attempt,” *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 18, no. 1 (2022): 64–94, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-bja10099>.

Just as in 1945, UN membership is not an absolute measure of sovereignty today. 32 of the organization's approximately 200 members belong to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which in a certain sense limits the foreign policy autonomy of its member states. 27 UN member states are members of the European Union, a membership that curtails their sovereignty in foreign economic affairs; similarly, the five members of the Eurasian Economic Union have also relinquished a certain degree of freedom in foreign economic decision-making. In certain critical areas, such as criminal proceedings for war crimes, 125 countries have relinquished their sovereign decision-making rights and acceded to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, in the hope that the body's authority might curb mass and inhuman violence. Thus, in the unipolar world order that emerged following the Cold War, the international institutional system became both the guarantor and the constrainer of national sovereignty.

SMALL WARS OF THE GREAT POWERS

The bipolar world order dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War was sustained by a comprehensive buffer zone between the two superpowers. The two geopolitical giants fought their proxy wars on the territories of small and large, more or less independent countries situated between the superpowers' spheres of influence and security zones; these territories thus served as a barrier to direct confrontation and another world war. This delicate balance of power made possible the existence of a third power order: the Non-Aligned Movement. The members of the movement founded in Belgrade in 1961—including India, South Africa, and Yugoslavia—were able to avoid becoming direct targets of Cold War rivalry, even if they were not entirely free from a certain degree of economic and political influence. From Korea and Vietnam, through Iran and Lebanon, Sudan and the Congo, all the way to Bolivia, however, millions of people in dozens of countries fell victim to the struggles over superpower spheres of influence between 1945 and 1992.²

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of Eastern European and post-Soviet states fostered the illusion of multilateral cooperation among equal nation-states worldwide, and the so-called “rules-based international order”—a historic moment in the establishment of a unipolar world order

2 Pawel Bernat, Cüneyt Güler, and Cyprian Aleksander Kozyra (eds.), *Proxy Wars from a Global Perspective: Non-State Actors and Armed Conflicts* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

intended to guarantee U.S. global hegemony—began. the historic moment of establishing a unipolar world order. However, this geopolitical program—unique in world history—failed, as U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio himself acknowledged in January 2025. In its place, a new type of multipolar international political and economic order is taking shape.³

In this multipolar world order, old and new geopolitical power centers are emerging—alongside the United States, China and Russia are also attempting to establish their own spheres of influence as major powers, and middle powers such as Turkey and Israel are rising, capable of asserting their independent foreign policy and foreign economic interests in their own neighborhoods more or less independently of the great powers. The United States’ intervention in Venezuela, as well as its hybrid demonstrations of force against Greenland and Cuba, reinforce Washington’s sphere of influence in the Western Hemisphere. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was also launched with the aim of consolidating Russia’s sphere of influence and security as a great power, just as Russia’s attempts to exert pressure serve this same goal from Belarus through Armenia to Kazakhstan. China primarily establishes its sphere of influence through economic mechanisms, such as debt traps: In Tajikistan, for example, one-third of the national debt is held by China, but in recent years, in the name of the fight against terrorism as well as public security and cybersecurity, Beijing has also gained significant influence over the Central Asian country’s security and domestic policies.

In the struggle for spheres of influence, just as during the Cold War, proxy wars are raging today. It was also U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio who acknowledged in March 2025 that the United States and Russia are waging a proxy war in Ukraine.⁴ Some analysts also compare the Syrian civil war to the conflicts of the Cold War, where the Assad regime—which maintained strategic partnerships first with the Soviet Union and later with Russia—was overthrown by an armed opposition group with the support of NATO member states. Similar processes are unfolding across the African continent, from Libya to Mali, though new players are emerging among the key actors in these conflicts alongside the major powers.

3 “Secretary Marco Rubio with Megyn Kelly of The Megyn Kelly Show,” U.S. Department of State, January 30, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-marco-rubio-with-megyn-kelly-of-the-megyn-kelly-show/>.

4 “Secretary of State Marco Rubio with Sean Hannity of Fox News,” U.S. Department of State, March 5, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-marco-rubio-with-sean-hannity-of-fox-news/>.

In this new, multipolar world order, as the crisis in the multilateral legal and institutional system deepens, rising middle powers are also waging proxy wars. The entire Middle East has been engulfed in flames by the proxy wars and direct clashes between Iran and Israel, while in recent years, for example, middle powers have also fought firefights in Nagorno-Karabakh and Kashmir that have claimed heavy casualties. Turkey in Libya, the United Arab Emirates in Sudan, and Israel in Somalia are all playing key roles in armed conflicts. Conflicts over spheres of influence between great and middle powers, which are reemerging based on historical patterns, have once again brought to the fore the dilemmas surrounding nation-state sovereignty and non-alignment, which weigh particularly heavily on small states as an increasingly unbearable burden.

THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF GEORGIA: WHY IS THE QUESTION OF STATUS A KEY ISSUE?

Ukraine was not the first country in the post-Soviet region to be occupied by Russian forces—in 2008, Russia also subjected Georgia to partial military occupation, and it currently maintains armed control over approximately one-fifth of the country. Although Georgia was a member of the UN, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe, the International Criminal Court, and even, together with Russia, the Commonwealth of Independent States, it nevertheless became embroiled in open war with its neighboring nuclear power in August 2008. Alongside the global economic crisis, it was precisely the five-day Russian-Georgian war that marked one of the first, spectacular cracks in the edifice of the unipolar world order, and with it, the illusions woven around the end of the great powers' spheres of influence began to unravel. European leaders, who were still pursuing a confident foreign policy in 2008, played a key role in the peace process following the war and brokered a ceasefire, which, while consolidating Russian control over the two breakaway regions, it put an end to the bloodshed, partially addressed Russia's security concerns, and seemingly opened the door to Euro-Atlantic integration for Georgia.

At this early stage of the multipolar world order, it was precisely the example of Georgia that demonstrated that, instead of the harmonious, liberal, and democratic cooperation of nation-states hoped to be equals, the ancient and rigid logic of international relations once again dictates the balance of power. This

is why, in Georgia in 2008, the question of status once again became a key issue in international relations: If the countries that gained independence following decolonization—particularly small nation-states located in the immediate vicinity of former empires or emerging middle powers—did not become full and integrated members of a military or political alliance, multilateralism alone will not be able to prevent them from finding themselves in the crosshairs of great power rivalry, a superpower proxy war, or within a foreign power’s sphere of influence more directly than ever before.

After 2008, Georgia established strategic partnerships with both the European Union and the United States, and cooperation between NATO and Georgia deepened within the Partnership for Peace program—the Georgian armed forces replaced former Soviet technology with systems used by NATO. However, along the administrative boundaries drawn in 2008 between the breakaway regions and Georgian government forces, the border between the Russian and North Atlantic security zones could not be consolidated, as there was a significant lack of European and American economic interests in Georgia, political capital and will—indispensable for strategic cooperation—on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as deep and comprehensive cultural and social ties between Georgia and the West. Nearly fourteen years have passed since the 2008 war, and although Georgia was viewed as a “beacon of freedom” in both America and Europe, and Tbilisi was kept on a nominal path toward Euro-Atlantic integration, significant European and American capital investments, connectivity and integration projects have not materialized between the western and eastern shores of the Black Sea.⁵ Moreover, during this time, Turkey’s European Union accession process also stalled, so the geopolitical and physical corridor linking Europe and Georgia did not materialize in Asia Minor.

Although Georgia applied for membership in the European Union following Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the European community used the regional security instability caused by the war to exert pressure rather than to deepen the Georgian-European geostrategic partnership. Unlike Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia was denied candidate status in 2022 by the European Council, which exploited the Georgian government’s vulnerable position to force it to join anti-Russian sanctions. Although the Georgian government, under partial Russian occupation, rejected European demands, and the European Council ultimately

5 “President Addresses and Thanks Citizens in Tbilisi, Georgia,” The White House, May 10, 2005, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/05/20050510-2.html>.

granted Georgia candidate status in 2023, the tensions arising from this political pressure plunged European-Georgian relations into a comprehensive crisis, and ultimately, in 2024, the European Council froze Georgia's accession process.⁶ At the same time, the Biden administration suspended the Georgian-American strategic partnership and postponed joint military exercises indefinitely. Georgia's nominal Euro-Atlantic partnership status effectively ceased to exist, and after the second Trump administration explicitly stated that Ukraine could not become a NATO member, Georgia's dreams of North Atlantic integration were also permanently shattered.

This forced non-alignment could have disastrous consequences for Georgia. In a multipolar world order shaped by the logic of the balance of power, the non-alignment of small states poses extraordinary security risks in the competition among great powers for spheres of influence and security. Even massive economies like India and South Africa, which have traditionally capitalized on their non-aligned status to their advantage in foreign policy and foreign trade despite great-power rivalry, are now forced to rethink their strategies amid an increasingly narrowing scope for maneuver. And states located on the peripheries of geopolitical poles—such as Belarus, Ukraine, Cuba, Panama, or even Denmark—are forced to make serious sacrifices even within their own alliance systems in order to maintain their sovereignty, at least partially. This is why states located in the buffer zone between spheres of influence, such as Finland and Sweden, are abandoning their traditional neutrality. Despite its peripheral location, Georgia remains stuck in a non-aligned status, and due to the political constraints of its cooperation with Russia, it is unable to join even loose cooperation frameworks such as the 3+3 regional consultation format.

FINLANDIZATION AND BALANCING STRATEGIES

It is not unprecedented, however, for foreign and security policy stability to arise from enforced neutrality on the periphery of great power spheres of influence: This is what we call Finlandization, which, while risky for Georgia, could offer a viable scenario for the coming period. In recent years, the term has been used in the literature with increasing frequency in connection with the settlement of the situation in Ukraine, as a reference to Finland's international status following

6 Péter Pál Kránitz, "Georgia's EU Accession Path in Light of the 'Foreign Agent Law' and Hungary's EU-Presidency," Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, July 14, 2024, <https://hiia.hu/en/georgias-eu-accession-path-in-light-of-the-foreign-agent-law-and-hungarys-eu-presidency/>

World War II. This is because the Soviet Union partially occupied Finland in 1939. The territories annexed at that time—Karelia and two northern regions—remain under Russian control to this day. Partly due to the fact of the occupation itself and partly due to the possibility of reescalation hanging over it like the Sword of Damocles, Finland was condemned to forced neutrality, which allowed it to retain a significant portion of its independence and sovereignty. Alongside Finland, the case of Austria also demonstrates that there is a place for neutral small states on the peripheries of great powers, as they act as a buffer zone, increasing the geopolitical maneuvering space of opposing poles in border regions.⁷

Georgia has effectively embarked on this path as well, and although the power dynamics of the new, multipolar world order are still in flux, and it is uncertain how long this state of affairs can be sustained, it appears to be a more predictable and stable system when compared to the security policy risks arising from potential conflicts caused by the dramatic shift in the regional balance of power resulting from joining one alliance system or another. In connection with all this, significant social and professional consultations are also underway in Georgia. In October 2024, a civil society organization named United Neutral Georgia was founded, which evolved into a political party in December 2025. The organization has placed Georgia's neutral status at the forefront of its political program and has initiated a referendum on the constitutional regulation of the country's neutral status. A lively professional debate is underway regarding neutrality; some see it as a security trap, while others view it as an opportunity.⁸

There are, however, certain methods that can further enhance the systemic geopolitical and security stability of Georgia, which has been forced into strategic neutrality. This stands in contrast to the multilateral institutional frameworks that have proven ineffective in the region—see, for example, the OSCE during the Karabakh wars—certain bilateral and trilateral strategic partnership networks have proven effective, particularly defense industry cooperation with emerging middle powers, as well as the balancing strategies that complement and shape these.

7 Brian Mefford, "The Finlandization Fallacy: Ukrainian Neutrality Will Not Stop Putin's Russia," Atlantic Council, February 27, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-finlandization-fallacy-ukrainian-neutrality-will-not-stop-putins-russia/>.

8 Nikoloz Khatiaashvili, "Neutrality in the Shadow of Russian Occupation and Its Strategic Risks for Georgia's National Security," EU Awareness Centre, November 2025, <https://euawareness.org/opinion8/>; "Georgia's Neutrality: How a New Pro-Russian Political Project Is Taking Shape," JAMnews, December 16, 2025, <https://jam-news.net/georgias-neutrality-how-new-pro-russian-political-project-is-taking-shape/>.

“Strategic hedging,” as it is known in English, refers in the literature on international relations to a foreign policy strategy that states employ specifically to avoid conflict with major powers, with the aim of managing risks and maximizing benefits. A state employing this strategy avoids exclusive alignment with any single geopolitical pole and may even take foreign policy steps that appear contradictory—as we will see below in the cases of Armenia and Azerbaijan with the United States, Iran, Turkey, and Israel. Balancing states establish cooperation with rival actors in international relations.⁹

Although they enjoy significantly different geographical, economic, and political situations—and are therefore only partially comparable to Georgia’s situation—the foreign policy strategies of neighboring Azerbaijan and Armenia allow for significant conclusions regarding the entire region. Azerbaijan, like Georgia, is not a member of any alliance, yet it has developed a remarkably effective network of security partnerships in its foreign relations. In the spirit of a balancing strategy, it has entered into strategic partnerships with both Turkey and Israel; these middle powers, which compete with each other in other areas, have supplied it with modern and effective military technology, which it has used to restore its own territorial integrity. Furthermore, it has established trilateral cooperation with the United States and Israel, which is capable of exerting a significant deterrent effect even at the conceptual level.

Armenia is currently following a similar yet significantly different geopolitical path than the one Georgia embarked upon following the 2003 Rose Revolution. Armenia is striving to systematically counterbalance its previously existing, one-sided relationship of dependence on Russia through cooperation with the West, South, and East: It has reached strategic levels of bilateral defense industry cooperation with India after becoming the Indian defense industry’s primary export market. It is seeking to resolve the primary conflict threatening Armenian territorial integrity—the so-called Zangezur Corridor issue—through U.S. capital investment, while maintaining its strategic partnership with Iran in the spirit of its balancing strategy. It is doing all this while maintaining its membership in the Eurasian Economic Union, with bilateral trade with Russia breaking decade-long records, and with the ratification of the peace agreement jointly adopted with Azerbaijan and the normalization of economic and political

⁹ Máté Szalai, “Connectivity, Apolarity, and Balancing—The Transformation of the Gulf Monarchies’ Policy Toward Global Great Powers,” *Külügyi Szemle* 23, no. 1 (2024): 33–53, https://doi.org/10.47707/Kulugyi_Szemle.2024.1.3.

relations with Turkey on the horizon.¹⁰

Through bilateral and trilateral strategic partnership frameworks, Armenia and Azerbaijan may also be able to establish security stability in a subregion where decades of bloody wars have made reconciliation and prosperity impossible. It is true that Russia played only an indirect role in the Karabakh conflict, whereas in Abkhazia and South Ossetia it has far more significant interests and a much greater presence, so while partnerships similar to Israeli-Azerbaijani or Turkish-Azerbaijani cooperation would not be capable of a military resolution to these two territorial conflicts, they might help stabilize the asymmetric balance of power, while a balancing strategy could also increase the number of powers interested in Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity on a global scale and the level of their attention.

India was the obvious partner for Armenia's balancing strategy, as it has interests in the region, including maintaining the stability of the North–South Transport Corridor and counterbalancing the Azerbaijan–Turkey–Pakistan alliance, which spurred it to action, yet throughout this, the pragmatic relations between New Delhi and Moscow also served as a safeguard against more serious Russian countermeasures. For Yerevan, the partnership between Armenia and the United States could be the key to normalization with the Turkic states of the region, although Russian and Iranian agitation could easily reach a critical level.

Georgia must also find its own India, and China can only be considered in terms of capital investments. NATO member Turkey could be an obvious partner, but increased dependence on Turkey could harbor serious geopolitical risks in the long term, particularly regarding the status of the Muslim-majority autonomous border region, Adjara, although these risks could be offset by potential foreign—primarily American—capital inflows, such as new shipping infrastructure development concessions, similar to U.S. investments in southern Armenia. Georgia must also prioritize even a partial restoration of transatlantic relations, but Washington, however, appears reluctant due to the economic and political normalization it seeks to establish with Russia.

It may seem like an extremely controversial—indeed, in the eyes of Georgian society, downright reprehensible—strategy, but from a realist perspective on international relations, it is perhaps precisely this strategic

10 Péter Pál Kránitz, “Multipolaritás, védelmi reglobalizáció és a Kasmír–Karabah proxy-mátrix” [Multipolarity, the Re-globalization of Defense, and the Kashmir–Karabakh Proxy Matrix], Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, September 4, 2025, <https://hii.hu/multipolaritas-vedelmi-reglobalizacio-es-a-kasmir-karabah-proxy-matrix/>.

balancing act between Russia and the European Union that could prove to be the most advantageous strategy for Georgia. A constructivist approach that takes into account both Russian and European political cultures, however, would also reject this strategy, as the discourses and political doctrines that have emerged in connection with the war in Ukraine—which border on political totalitarianism—reject even dialogue between the two camps. Armenia provides an exception to this; although it is a strategic partner of Russia, at the level of discourse, it is the European Union’s new protégé in the South Caucasus.

Summary

The sovereignty of nation-states, especially small ones, is a historical anomaly: The majority of current UN member states were until recently part of empires, and in a world order that is once again becoming multipolar, the principle of the balance of power—which is regaining the upper hand—does not favor their independence. Sooner or later, they will find themselves in the crosshairs of great-power rivalry over spheres of influence and security. The patterns of recent international relations demonstrate that multilateralism has been unable to consolidate a “rules-based” system of relations among nation-states believed to be equal. The conflicting foreign economic and foreign policy strategies of individual power centers clash and culminate in conflicts: Proxy wars reminiscent of the Cold War are once again raging worldwide. The status of small, uncommitted states left outside the various alliance systems thus appears to be called into question once more, and the case of Georgia serves as a prime example.

Georgia’s nominal Euro-Atlantic partnership framework, in place since 2008, has proven to rest on extremely shaky foundations, as it was built on the civil sphere and ideological–discursive soft power factors rather than on political–defense cooperation mechanisms grounded in strategic economic capital investment and development. Since the European Union and the United States did not take advantage of the regional security policy destabilization caused by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine to fill this gap and secure their geostrategic positions in Georgia, but instead focused on candidate-status conditionality and exerting pressure, the fragile partnership between Georgia and the West has collapsed, and Georgia finds itself in a position of forced neutrality.

Finlandization, however, if properly managed, could even guarantee stability for Georgia. As the historical experiences of Finland and Austria show, a natural feature of great-power competition for spheres of influence is the pursuit of maintaining buffer zones, which Georgia could turn to its own advantage by using a hedging strategy, and the recent foreign policy strategies of the other two states in the region, Azerbaijan and Armenia, serve as useful examples.



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