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THE PAPER | India-Georgia Relationship: A Window of Opportunity

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By Hriday Ch. Sarma and Levan Khutsishvili



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Abstract: India and Georgia, representing two ancient surviving civilizations in the world, are not located far away from within Asia. The two nations had deep linkages in the past; however, they mostly remained disconnected over the past few centuries for various reasons. In recent years, they are experiencing a steady rise in people-to-people engagement, especially in trade. Considering the changing global geopolitical realities and increasing avenues of Europe-Asia trade, India urgently needs to revive and rebuild its historic ties with Georgia to meet its national interests in the 21st century. Georgia could be a 'Gateway to Europe' for India.

Latest Bilateral Upswing

On September 24, 2017, the relics of the 17th century Georgia's martyred saint, Queen Ketevan, were transferred from India to Georgia following many years of extensive negotiations between the cultural agencies of the two countries [1]. Her holy body parts are now put on display at the Georgian National Museum and the Holy Trinity Church (*Sameba*) in Tbilisi, and will also be taken to other dioceses in Georgia [2]. India handed over that to Georgia at no cost, but under the transfer agreement, the relics of the beloved saint will remain in Georgia for six months and then come back to India [3]. The mutual gesticulation among the countries for each other's culture and heritage marks a new beginning in the bilateral relationship, which is set to blossom in the coming years.

At present, India and Georgia are deepening bilateral ties in an array of fields, including but not limited to tourism, aviation, investment and cultural exchange. On April 16, 2017, the two countries issued a "Joint Statement" to launch the study on a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which was signed by the Minister of Sustainable Development of Georgia and

Commerce and Industry Minister of India [4]. Both countries have set up a Joint Feasibility Study Group for negotiating the FTA- which if realized will radically change the existing rules on the conduct of bilateral trade. In recent years, the people-to-people engagement between the two countries has been markedly increasing; thereby resulting in bilateral trade turnover of USD 107 million in 2015-2016 [5].

New Delhi and Tbilisi for the first time started running direct flight in 2016, which was facilitated with the signing of an inter-governmental Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) on November 10, 2016 [6]. They had also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) the preceding year, i.e. 2015, for establishing cooperation in the fields of election management and administration [7]. The flurry of recent bilateral agreements has set up a momentum for private entrepreneurs/ companies and public-sector organizations from both sides to jointly work for establishing a closer socio-economic relationship and political-strategic partnership at the inter-state level.

Georgia - A Historic Nation

Georgia is a small country located on the southern slopes of the Caucasus Mountains. Today it has a population of 3.7 million, with the majority of them, are followers of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. The country's main language is Georgian- which is also the literary language for all ethnographic groups of Georgian people, particularly those who speak other South Caucasian languages: Megrelians, Svans, and Laz. The cultural heritage of Georgian people is profoundly rich, and their history antique. During the medieval era, a powerful Georgian kingdom existed that reached the peak of its power in the 12th to early 13th centuries [8]. Thereafter, the nation experienced a long period of Turkish and Persian domination, and subsequently, it was annexed by the Russian Empire in early 19th century [9].

An independent Georgian state shortly existed from 1918 to 1921, when it was re-incorporated into the newly formed communist state of USSR. In 1936 Georgia became a constituent (union) republic and continued its association until the breakup of the USSR. Unlike most of other union republics, the Georgian economy was considerably diversified and modernized during the Soviet period. It became one of the leading pro-independence republics during the Soviet Turmoil and declared its sovereignty on November 19, 1989, finally achieving full independence on April 9, 1991 [10].

However, since independence, Georgia has been besieged with a number of problems, which although complex were somehow controlled. The nationalist policy of its first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, ended in a bloody coup d'état. This was followed by almost four years of civil war that resulted in the de-facto secession of its two regions, i.e., South Ossetia in 1994 and Abkhazia in 1994 [11]. Eduard Shevardnadze, with ties to the old Soviet regime, got elected as president of Georgia in 1995. He inherited a country marred by the chaos that was steadily slipping towards complete collapse. However, Shevardnadze was able to steer Georgia to relative normalcy and even shepherded it into the Council of Europe [12]. Mikheil Saakashvili ousted Eduard Shevardnadze in the 2003 Rose Revolution [13]. Saakashvili, likewise to an extent, inherited a broken country, rife with rampant corruption and organized crime, with unfriendly neighbors endeavoring to stifle Georgia's economic development.

Today the picture is mixed. Georgia has transformed itself from a failed state into a transitional economy. Saakashvili with his independent and visionary leadership was able to win the support of many EU member countries, which led to its inclusion in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) [14]. This support along with the West's general anxiety towards Russia's growing sphere of influence across Eurasia [15], especially after the 2008 Russia-Georgia War [16], prompted the launching of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), in which Georgia is included [17]. Since the 2008 NATO Summit at Bucharest, where allied heads of states promised Georgia full membership ahead, it is treading well to becoming a part of the Alliance [18]. Moreover, last year the EU-Georgia Association Agreement entered into force, which allows Georgian nationals to travel visa-free to all EU member states, save Britain and Ireland, and including non-EU Schengen-area countries Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland [19].

India-Georgia Relations: Challenges and Opportunities

Ample literary and folklore-based evidence exist pointing towards close trade and the societal relationship between India and Georgia in ancient and medieval times. The Hindu Vedic scriptures mention the name of Khatian king "*Ganish*" as "*Ganesh*" and the Sumero-Akhadian king "*Naramsin*" as "*Narasimha*" [20]. Gamkrelidze & Ivanov (1984) claim that the Proto-Dravidians, those of Mediterranean origin while traveling North-East on the way to India in 4 BCE had linguistic and cultural intercommunications with the relative civilization of ancient Georgia (Caucasus) [21]. This resulted in mutual linguistic, cultural and other wide-ranging ties, borrowing and dispersing of common words, mythology, symbols, etc. Certain linguistic resemblances are found between Georgian and Sanskrit languages. E.g. the Sanskrit word *tanu* (= body) in Georgian is *tani* (=

body); the Sanskrit *mala* (= garland) in Georgian is *mala* (= spinal, like garland); the Sanskrit noun *bandha* (= tie) in Georgian is used as a verb *bandva* (= to tie); and so on.

During the Soviet era, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru made an official visit to Tbilisi in 1955 [23]. Subsequently, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi visited there in 1976 and Atal Bihari Vajpayee as India's Foreign Minister to Georgia in June 1978 [24]. India recognized Georgia's independence on 26th December 1991 and established formal diplomatic relations on 28th September 1992 [25]. India, in fact, became one of the first countries in the world to recognize Georgia's independence in the United Nations. Since then the two independent countries have regularly exchanged visits among top officials and businessmen, resulting in a further strengthening of bilateral relations.

However, until today, India does not have a Resident Mission in Georgia. India's Ambassador to Armenia with residence in its capital Yerevan is simultaneously accredited to Georgia. This has remained as such largely due to India's political affinity towards Russia that endeavors military subjugation of 'West-looking Georgia'. Despite that, at present, a growing Indian population resides and works in Georgia. They are pursuing various professions, including academics, agriculture, wholesale/retail trading and so on. The Indian expat community there is affluent and exerts considerable influence on the economic and political fronts.

In today's changing geopolitical reality, Russia under Putin in his current presidential term is making new partnerships with countries around the world, including with India's arch-rival – Pakistan [26]. Russia is trying to regain its preponderant position within the former Soviet Union territories and across broad Eurasia. Its realist foreign policy approach is establishing a new Eurasian security framework in its favor that facilitates it to conduct trade freely with countries in Europe and Asia. Hence, it is now high time for Indian policymakers to come out of the Soviet hangover of Russia-India 'special friendship'. They need to make prudent adjustments to India's foreign policies to make new allies across Euro-Asia.

Georgia, located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, can become a gateway for India to the European market. Additionally, it can become a key strategic ally for India *vis-à-vis* Pakistan's increasing defense cooperation with neighboring Azerbaijan [27]. The two market economies can build sustained partnerships in the knowledge-intensive service sectors, such as education, information & communication, and emerging niche sectors, such as renewable energy and green technologies. Such partnerships in process of fruition will create regional and intra-regional value chains that will interlock the domestic markets of the two countries. This, in turn, will lead towards market integration between South Asia and South Caucasus- two neighboring regions within Asia that practically remained cut-off for long due to many a reason, like the prolonged imperial rule, the establishment of Westphalia state system and apathy of ruling national governments for close bilateral ties.

Conclusion

Georgia and India - two 'civilization-states' - are now attempting to re-discover their ancient ties. India, a fast-developing large economy, and a rising global power hold the greater responsibility of reaching out and actively engaging with Georgia, a small state of great geo-strategic importance and a modestly large open market, so as to generate wide-ranging mutual benefits. A close India-Georgia relationship will enable India to gain a strategic foothold in the resource-rich South Caucasus region, thereby expanding its strategic depth on the Eurasian theatre. Georgia, in turn, will have a new supporter connecting it to the Orient.

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