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RCDS 2008 – CONTEMPORARY STRATEGIC ISSUES

Assess The State Of Post-Communist Democracy And The Rule Of Law In Georgia And Develop A Strategy For Improving The Country's Democratic Institutions And Governance.

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Assess the state of post-communist democracy and the rule of law in Georgia and develop a strategy for improving the country's democratic institutions and governance.

Key Judgements:

- Sovereignty is a higher priority than democracy and the rule of law in Georgia—though the way forward involves a reversal of this attitude.
- Since the November 2003 'Rose Revolution', government influence on civil society has surpassed civil society influence on government.
- Georgia has to re-evaluate the significance of democratization in relation to other vital national interests, and incorporate democratization efforts within a larger overall strategy.

Discussion.

1. Georgia is a fledgling democracy. Democracy indicators have risen since 2003, but still are low by western standards. Georgia's transformation from Soviet rule to the current state of democracy has been uneven and punctuated with crisis. Given the regional and internal tension in the aftermath of the August war with Russia and Georgia's aspirations for NATO and EU membership, this next year promises to be another crisis period for Georgia's democratic trajectory.

2. Since the 2003 'Rose Revolution' that brought down the Shevardnadze government by civil demonstration, government capability to influence civil society has far surpassed civil society's capability to influence the government. To restore a more democratic equilibrium between the two requires both the government and Georgians themselves to embrace the goal of increased democratization. Though the desire to improve the democratic nature of Georgia appears genuine, currently there are not significant motive forces to create the energy to compel the necessary changes. Though much international support has been given to Georgia (OSCE, UN, EU) in recent years, it alone has been insufficient to make meaningful advances in the midst of larger and seemingly endless crises that occupy the daily attentions of the government. A larger galvanizing force is required to make significant democratic reform.

3. Georgia is pursuing both NATO and EU accession. Georgia's sentiments in the past were 'NATO-first' given the threat of Russian intentions regarding South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Georgia pursued with less vigour EU accession. Georgia was seeking a security guarantee via NATO membership and Article V protection in the face of the Russian threat. Since the threat has now been realized, Georgia—and NATO by default—appear to be entering a lingering stalemate over the status of the two Georgian republics. The strategic calculus has now fundamentally changed. Georgia must determine how to manoeuvre between a resurgent Russia and a polarizing US-led NATO.

4. Though EU's overall interest in Georgia has risen since the August conflict, the EU is unlikely to be very interested in Georgia as an accession partner given the current occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia; Georgia's small, weakening economy; and bleak aid-dependent prospects. These negatives are enough to obviate contrary arguments based upon similarities to Cyprus compromises any time soon.

5. With NATO “stalemated” and the EU ‘disinterested’—at least in terms of near-term accession—Georgia’s upward trajectory in any number of areas is now increasingly dependent upon a strong bilateral relationship with the United States. But given a pending change of administration, the probability of a more introspective presidential focus to deal with the financial crisis at home, and perhaps the stabilization of US—Russian rhetoric over the next number of months, Georgia should recognize that they are in a position of potentially diminishing strategic value and move quickly to prevent the US from losing interest.

6. Georgia can best maintain US strategic interest by reinvigorating their democratization and rule of law reforms via an ‘EU First’ strategy. Though focused on the US, Georgia should work predominantly through EU structures—this provides a proven framework for democratic advances while demonstrating their commitment to Europe that may pay off with eventual EU accession in the years to come. This also allows Georgia to ‘export’ their efforts and commitment to democracy to the US to help maintain their currently strategically indispensable relationship.

7. This ‘soft power’ play works to the advantage of Georgia, the EU, and the US. Georgia gets enhanced security through the maintenance of strong bilateral ties with the US while concurrently laying the groundwork for future economic development through the establishment of an ‘EU standard’ business environment, the EU gets to bolster its ‘soft power’ credentials while continuing to act as mediator between Georgia and Russia, and the US gets the development of a democracy in the Caucasus. Any Russian attempts (if detected) to subvert the democratization of a sovereign Georgia will only erode their already faltering international prestige.

8. Georgia’s geostrategic environment is shaped by Russia’s resurgence as the regional power and the current polarity of US involvement. Georgia has previously pursued a “NATO First” strategy towards international integration based upon security threats from Russia. Given the new strategic framework post-Russian occupation, Georgia should consider a transformation to an “EU First” strategy, aggressively pursuing democratization and rule of law reforms—this will strengthen their security posture, lay the groundwork for an enhanced economic outlook, and improve the products of civil society available from a more democratic government.

Recommendations:

1. Adopt an ‘EU-First’ grand strategy. Subordinate NATO aspirations and rhetoric to those of the EU and attendant economic and democratic reforms, while concentrating on achieving political and financial support to sustain Georgian state identity in accordance with international norms.
2. Maintain US relationship through ‘EU First’-based advances.
3. Continue to work on reforms necessary to meet NATO standards, with the understanding that European members are unlikely to achieve the necessary consensus to propose MAP for Georgia.
4. Maintain visibility and UN engagement regarding further Russian advances into Georgia—international response will be easier to garner if this is not seen to be a ‘NATO problem’.