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Geopolitical Rivalry over Connectivity: Where Does Georgia Stand?

By Dimitri Tskitishvili, CDGR

Georgia is positioning itself within two competing connectivity architectures at once: the Western-backed Middle Corridor and TRIPP on one side, the Russian- and Iranian-driven International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) on the other. The Georgian Dream (GD) government courts Western actors while moving closer to Russia and Iran, and while tolerating the use of Georgian infrastructure for north–south transit.

This dual positioning follows from regime survival and narrow transactional interests rather than from a settled foreign policy course. Multi-vector engagement is common practice in the region, but in Georgia's case it cannot function as balancing: the government has itself hollowed out the partnerships with the EU and the United States that would anchor such a policy. What remains is an attempt to draw material benefits from both projects while keeping options open until the regional balance of power settles.

1. WHAT HAPPENED

The Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) initiative has entered its implementation phase. On the margins of the 81st session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA), the US Department of State convened a forum entitled "Prosperity through Peace: Investing in the Trans-Caspian Trade Route and TRIPP". Much of the discussion there turned on the Trans-Caspian Enterprise Fund, announced by Secretary of State Marco Rubio in August 2026 and backed by USD 201 million in US government funding. The New York forum promoted the fund rather than launched it.[1]

A second forum was held alongside the UNGA, the 7th Caspian Business Forum, "Connectivity, Finance, and Energy along the Middle Corridor".[2] TRIPP was central to both. Participants, among them officials of the US Department of State, presented it as a component of the wider architecture of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), commonly referred to as the Middle Corridor.

Official Tbilisi's public position appears unambiguous. At both forums, Deputy Foreign Minister Lasha Darsalia stressed Georgia's role in developing the Middle Corridor; at the State

Department event he added that the development of both the Middle Corridor and TRIPP would strengthen regional connectivity, and that Georgia stood ready to contribute.[3]

The GD government frames Georgia as a strategic and irreplaceable segment of the Middle Corridor, with the capacity and the resources to serve as a regional hub. It points to a set of flagship projects: railway modernisation, the Black Sea Submarine Electricity Cable, the Anaklia Deep Sea Port, and the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan and South Caucasus pipelines.[4] Anaklia now rests with the state alone: in July 2026 the government confirmed the exit of the Chinese-Singaporean consortium that held 49 per cent of the shares, and announced that it would develop the port under a landlord model, with operations expected to begin in 2029.[5] The same message ran through Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze's address to the UNGA.[6]

A competing north–south corridor is gaining ground in parallel. The INSTC, launched in 2000 by Russia, Iran and India, connects Russia with Iran, the Middle East and India. Since 2022 it has acquired a second function, as a route for circumventing Western sanctions.[7] Russian officials and business figures have named Georgian territory, including the occupied regions, as a potential link in these plans.[8]

Projects on the ground run in the same direction. In December 2025, operators of a transit terminal in Gali, in occupied Abkhazia, reported that construction was finished and that preparatory work was under way; the terminal is intended to route Asian cargo to Russia, a scheme critics read as sanctions circumvention. On the operators' own account, Iranian trucks would enter Abkhazia across the Enguri bridge from Georgian-controlled territory and unload onto trains in the Ochamchira district. Whether the terminal has since begun operating is not confirmed.[9] In the occupied Tskhinvali region, the de facto authorities are working with Russia's state development corporation VEB.RF on an Alagir–Tskhinvali railway, conceived as part of a route from Russia to the South Caucasus and the Middle East.[10] Upper Lars, the only road crossing on the Georgian–Russian border, was Russia's busiest land crossing by cargo volume in 2024, with more than 4.8 million tonnes, and handled 76,796 trucks in the first four months of 2026 on routes linking Russia with the South Caucasus and the Middle East.[11]

Asked about the Gali terminal, the Prime Minister declined to comment on the project, citing Georgia's non-recognition of the administrative boundary, and stated that the government had taken no steps in response; the transit arrangement previously mediated by Switzerland remains suspended. No diplomatic or legal action has followed.[12] Such restraint points to tacit acquiescence.

2. WHAT IT MEANS

In narrow geo-economic terms, the government's position holds together. In geopolitical terms it does not. Georgia has undergone sustained and well-documented democratic backsliding.[13] That domestic regression has been matched by a sharp deterioration in relations

with its Western strategic partners. In November 2024, less than a year after Georgia was granted EU candidate status, the government announced that it would not pursue accession talks until 2028. The United States responded by suspending its Strategic Partnership with Georgia.[14] The EU accession process has been halted de facto ever since.[15] Contacts with Washington have partially resumed, but US engagement remains largely transactional and the Strategic Partnership has not been restored.[16]

Official rhetoric has meanwhile come to reproduce Kremlin narratives and propaganda techniques.[17] Engagement with Iran has intensified at the highest levels. Kobakhidze travelled to Tehran twice in 2024, for the funeral of President Ebrahim Raisi and for President Masoud Pezeshkian's inauguration. In July 2026, President Mikheil Kavelashvili attended the state funeral of Ali Khamenei in Tehran and met Pezeshkian there, a visit that drew criticism in Washington.[18] In October 2026, Kobakhidze met Pezeshkian in Yerevan, where the two discussed closer economic ties.[19]

Western governments have sanctioned GD-affiliated businesses and officials, citing both the repression of protesters and the advancement of Russian interests. Among those sanctioned is Bidzina Ivanishvili, the founder of GD and widely regarded as Georgia's de facto ruler.[20] Confrontation with traditional partners alongside closer ties with their rivals leaves Georgia looking unreliable even as a transactional partner.

Georgia is not a formal member of the INSTC. The developments set out above nonetheless suggest that parts of its transport infrastructure are becoming functionally integrated into the corridor's network, and that Tbilisi is doing little to resist that process.

So where does Georgia stand? The question is whether engagement in both directions amounts to a multi-vector foreign policy, to hedging, or to something else.

Measured against Georgia's own interests, the two architectures are not equivalent, and an ambiguous posture between them mitigates none of the security risks the country faces. The Western-backed Middle Corridor and closer economic cooperation with the EU and the United States complement the European and Euro-Atlantic course enshrined in the Constitution; EU accession is supported by 71 per cent of citizens.[21] The competing architecture is dominated by Russia, Georgia's principal security threat, and its envisaged routes run through the occupied territories, cutting against Georgian sovereignty. Without a strategic partnership framework with the West, Georgia faces Russia with less cover than before.

Even a multi-vector policy driven strictly by economic interest would therefore require normalised relations with traditional partners and unambiguous participation in Western-backed regional projects. The government has shown little inclination towards either.

3. WHAT TO WATCH

Two courses are plausible.

Under the first, the government engages with both corridors to buy time until one of them reaches a decisive stage. Its eventual choice would favour whichever project delivers economic benefits without calling the legitimacy of its rule into question, and, given the volatility of GD's foreign policy, would remain reversible. The indicators are continued pursuit of Western financing, for instance for the Black Sea Submarine Electricity Cable, combined with the avoidance of irreversible commitments to either side.

Under the second, Georgia's growing economic dependence on Russia and Iran creates obligations. Russia was Georgia's second-largest trading partner in January to July 2026, with 11.7 per cent of turnover, and its largest source of visitors in 2025, while exports to Iran rose more than eightfold year on year in January to August 2026, from USD 19.1 million to USD 161.9 million.[22] On this course, Georgia would formally endorse Middle Corridor projects while quietly obstructing those that conflict with Russian and Iranian interests. The indicators are unexplained regulatory delays, contract terminations or cost overruns in Western-backed projects, set against the parallel expansion of north–south infrastructure.

Either way, dual positioning offers the government two short- and medium-term advantages. It can keep drawing revenue from north–south transit linked to the INSTC. And through the Middle Corridor it can sustain transactional relations with Western countries, preserving Georgia's access to Western markets and financial systems. That access is also what keeps the country attractive to capital of other kinds, including money tied to sanctions-exposed and illicit ventures: the Kulevi refinery, now subject to an EU transaction ban that applies from 25 January 2027 and whose listing the Commission was to review by 25 October 2026,[23] and the transnational call-centre and crypto-fraud networks operating from Georgian territory.[24]

Two further markers will show which course is being followed: whether the Kulevi listing survives the Commission's review and the ban takes effect as scheduled, and whether any Western-backed project in Georgia slows without an explanation the government is prepared to put in writing.

On the evidence available, the policy serves regime survival and narrow transactional interests, and it departs from the strategic course the Constitution sets out. Neither hedging nor a multi-vector policy describes it. Drift does.

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