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BEYOND THE HORIZON: ANAKLIA AS A FORCE MULTIPLIER IN NATO'S BLACK SEA SECURITY

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Abstract

This article analyzes how the Anaklia Port factor will strengthen Georgia's role both on a regional scale and within the Western interests context. The paper develops the idea that the successful completion of the Anaklia Deep Sea Port project is indispensable for the long-term strategic viability and security of the Black Sea region. Positioned at a critical geopolitical crossroads on the eastern flank of Europe, the Port's significance transcends economic utility; it constitutes a pivotal element of Euro-Atlantic security architecture. The Port will play a central role in the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor), offering a vital, Russia-bypassing conduit for trade and energy transmission between Europe and Asia (Rodarte, 2023). For NATO, Anaklia represents a crucial logistical nexus that would significantly enhance the Alliance's ability to reinforce its eastern presence, ensuring the rapid deployment and sustainment of forces in the highly contested Black Sea region (World Bank, 2024). In the conditions of modern hyper-competition, international transport corridors are leading instruments of economic and geopolitical strategy, among which the Black Sea region plays a solid role, with its geographical location, which historically has been and remains a bridge connecting Europe and Asia. It is clearly considered a vital transit hub, situated at the intersection of the strategic interests of the US, the European Union, NATO, Russia, Turkey, and China. For its part, it is crucial for Georgia to improve its transit infrastructure, with the Anaklia Deep Sea Port project serving as the primary means of achieving this goal. It openly presents Georgia's role in the development of the Europe-Asia transport infrastructure. Furthermore, there are several major maritime ports in Black Sea basin that play an important role across the region, such as: Constanta (Romania), Varna (Bulgaria), Odesa (Ukraine), Novorossiysk (Russia), Samsun and Trabzon (Turkey), Batumi, Poti, and Anaklia (future) (Georgia) (Shalikadze, 2025).

Keywords: Black Sea Security, Anaklia Port, Georgia, NATO, Geopolitics, Regional stability.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The present article draws on three core theories of International Relations, which allow for the analysis of the Anaklia Port as a multidimensional strategic asset:

1) **Liberal Institutionalism:** This framework emphasizes the roles of NATO and the European Union in maintaining regional stability (Keohane, 1984; Axelrod & Keohane, 1985). Within this lens, the Anaklia Port is viewed as a key element of the Western security architecture, enhancing the Alliance's logistical capabilities and advancing Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

2). **Realist Geopolitics and Great Power Competition:** This framework conceptualizes the Anaklia Port as a geopolitical nexus where the competing interests of systemic actors – namely the United States,

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NATO, China, and Russia – intersect in a zero-sum struggle for power and regional hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2001; Huntington, 1996). From this perspective, the port's strategic positioning constitutes a "red line" for the Russian Federation's maritime security doctrine, while simultaneously offering the People's Republic of China a mechanism for expanding its geostrategic leverage through infrastructure diplomacy. Consequently, the project emerges as a focal point of contestation, directly challenging U.S. naval interests and the broader Euro-Atlantic security architecture in the Black Sea basin.

3). **Complex Interdependence:** This theoretical lens focuses on the Anaklia Port as a critical node within the "Middle Corridor," where economic connectivity is functionally inseparable from regional security (Keohane & Nye, 1977). By facilitating a vital trade and energy transit conduit between Europe and Asia that bypasses the Russian Federation, the port enhances Georgia's systemic resilience and contributes significantly to the diversification of European energy security. In this framework, the project transcends mere infrastructure, emerging as a mechanism for reducing asymmetrical dependencies and fostering a more stable, integrated Eurasian logistics network.

Introduction

Anaklia Port and its surrounding territory possess a rich and ancient history. Anaklia was one of the colonies of Heraclea, a city of the Kingdom of Pontus. Furthermore, during the 15th through 17th centuries, Anaklia functioned as a pivotal seaport for the Principality of Odishi, maintaining active trade relations with Trebizond and Constantinople (Tugushi, 1991).

The concept of constructing a deep-sea port in Georgia, driven by considerations of geographical expediency in the territory of Anaklia village, situated at the confluence of the Enguri River, dates back to the 1960s. The initial endeavor to realize the port's construction was planned during the Soviet era in 1986; however, its implementation proved impossible due to a lack of necessary resources and the prevailing situation on the brink of the Soviet Union's collapse (Avdaliani, 2020). Following the restoration of Georgia's independence, several subsequent attempts to construct a port in Anaklia during the 1990s and early 2000s proved unsuccessful. Given the prevailing geopolitical and economic challenges, the idea of building the port remained merely a concept (Aslanishvili & Halpern, 2020). As Georgia pursued closer integration with the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the concept of establishing a port city and deep-sea port was reprioritized and officially announced in 2011 (Netgazeti, 2011). The construction of the Anaklia Port was fundamentally viewed as a strategic pillar of Euro-Atlantic integration. Consequently, the Anaklia Deep Sea Port is not merely an economic project; it constitutes a pivotal element of security and geopolitical orientation for Georgia and the entire Black Sea region. It is a critical linkage for reinforcing the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), known as the Middle Corridor, which provides a secure alternative between the West and Asia, for the shipment of goods between the West and Asia, bypassing Russian territory.

The Anaklia Port encompasses four principal functions: economic and connective, military, and logistical.

The issue of the Anaklia Port construction was reactivated by the Government of Georgia in 2013-2014, when a corresponding tender was announced to select interested parties for the port's development. Following the tender, the Georgian-American company, Anaklia Development Consortium (LLC TBC Holdings and LLC Conti Group), was declared the winner in 2016. European and a leading US-based port operator were also expected to be involved in the port's construction alongside the consortium. Along with the consortium, it was also planned to involve leading European and US port operators in the construction of the port.

The port was proposed to be a deep-sea port, the largest in the eastern Black Sea coast: On phase one (1) of the Anaklia Port must reach a capacity to handle a minimum of six hundred thousand (600,000) TEU per annum, which translates to seven million and eight hundred thousand (7,800,000) tons, assuming an average of 13 tons/TEU. The projected cargo turnover of the Anaklia port, once operating at full capacity, is expected to exceed 100 million tons annually (Ministry of Economy of Georgia, 2023). The port is designed to be capable of processing Panamax and post-Panamax cargo ships.

The planned depth of the Anaklia Port (16 meters at the initial stage, increasing to 20.5 meters later) significantly exceeds that of other major ports in the Black Sea basin, including Constanța (19 m), Novorossiysk (15.6 m), and Poti (8.5 m). These parameters are critically important for servicing modern, high-capacity commercial fleets, which enhances the project's competitiveness and strengthens its strategic role at both regional and global levels. (Chkhenkeli, & Jikia, 2025).

Georgia's Strategic Role in the South Caucasus

Georgia's strategic importance in the South Caucasus is derived from its pivotal geographical location, robust infrastructure, and high potential for international partnership (Kakachia, et al., 2024). Situated on the eastern Black Sea coast, the country serves as a critical transit axis connecting Europe and the South Caucasus and is a principal link between the Black Sea and Caspian basins (NATO, 2011; NATO, 2022). Functioning as an energy and logistical corridor – anchored by infrastructure like the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the Southern Gas Corridor – Georgia has accrued significant "transit capital," a diplomatic asset used for foreign-policy leverage (Flanagan et al., 2020). This geostrategic position places the country squarely within NATO's strategic purview and regional policy (NATO, 2025; Malek, 2008).

Georgia's geostrategic role will be further strengthened by the Anaklia Port, considering that the eastern part of the Black Sea lacks deep-sea ports, a factor that has constrained the development of economic relations in the region. Consequently, strategically located, Anaklia is poised to become the exclusive deep-sea port in Georgia, capable of handling large Panamax vessels that currently bypass the country for ports in Türkiye or Russia. More importantly, the deep-sea port will enhance the goods handling capacity of the Trans-Caspian International Transportation Route (TITR). It will become a strategic land trade route linking Europe with Central Asia and China via Georgia (Popkhadze, 2025).

In alignment with Georgia's European integration, the future Port is poised to foster Georgia's economic sustainability, mitigate regional dependencies, and reinforce the country's function as a regional hub. All of the aforementioned developments will subsequently strengthen Georgia's role in the region, providing it with the capacity to become a cornerstone for Euro-Atlantic structures in the region, as well as a deserving member of the EU family.

The Role of the Anaklia Port in Euro-Atlantic Security

Anaklia's unique location showcases Georgia as a key country at the geographic crossroads between Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The Anaklia Port is the sole deep-sea port on the eastern Black Sea coast, which could become a vital link in NATO's eastern security architecture. It will enable NATO to strengthen its presence in the Black Sea region, both in terms of logistical and military support.

Nowadays, large vessels can enter the Black Sea from the Mediterranean Sea only through the Bosphorus Strait. However, the eastern littoral of the Black Sea currently lacks a port infrastructure capable of accommodating large vessels carrying eastward-bound cargo. A comparable logistical challenge exists for freight originating in Asia, where the majority of shipments are routed by rail first through Turkey before proceeding to the European Union (Khutsiberidze 2025).

The existence of the Anaklia Deep Sea Port will facilitate greater flexibility in cargo transportation turnover between Europe and Asia. The most significant aspect of this route is that the Port will connect Europe and Asia while bypassing Russia. In alignment with the strategic interests of NATO and the European Union, the Port will provide the West with the capacity to reduce Russia's influence over regional transport and energy routes. Above all, the Anaklia Port is poised to play a decisive role in European energy security by enabling the diversification of Caspian resource transit. This shift is strategically vital for mitigating the European Union's dependence on Russian supplies, which impacts its broader geopolitical stance (Akhmedova, & Gelashvili, 2024).

For the United States, the Anaklia project represents a key strategic instrument for reinforcing Euro-Atlantic security and influence within the Black Sea region. It is critically important for the U.S. that a sovereign, Western-oriented logistical nexus exists in the region, one that is free from Russian influence. Furthermore, the Port will facilitate the movement of U.S. forces across the eastern Black Sea.

Initially, in 2016, a Georgian-American consortium was selected for the execution of the port project (GoG, 2016). This selection affirms U.S. interest in the Georgian port and, in turn, implies an increase in U.S. economic and political influence within the region. Alongside the Georgian-American consortium, several international organizations, specifically SSA Marine, Wondernet Express, and G-Star Ltd., were to be involved in the implementation of the project. Furthermore, the project's financing was being planned by international financial institutions, including the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the U.S. Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) (Khutsiberidze, 2025).

Furthermore, the EU publicly declared its commitment to co-fund the second phase of the Anaklia Port construction with a contribution of €233 million, supplementing this with €100 million for the port's critical access railway (World Bank; Forbes Georgia. 2019). This declaration substantiates the European Union's

support for Georgia's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures and its definitive interest in the Anaklia Port project. According to the plan, the Anaklia Port, constructed with Western investments, was slated to receive its first vessels in 2021.

The substantial significance attributed by the U.S. government to the completion of the Anaklia Port and its subsequent operation under Western auspices is evidenced by the statement delivered by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in 2019: "The project and others will enhance Georgia's relationship with free economies and prevent Georgia from falling prey to Russian or Chinese economic influence. Those pretended friends do not have Georgia's best interests at heart" (Civil.ge, 2019).

Unfortunately, owing to a failure to reach consensus between the financial investors and the Government of Georgia concerning the provision of commercial risk guarantees, the contract with the "Anaklia Development Consortium" was terminated on January 9, 2020, based on a decision by the Government of Georgia (Ministry of Infrastructure of Georgia, 2020).

The significance of the port acquired a distinctive role following 2022, when the geopolitical landscape changed dramatically after Russia invaded Ukraine. Western sanctions severely restricted Russia's ability to utilize its ports for international trade, particularly those that depended on European markets. Novorossiysk, a key port for Russian exports, consequently became less viable under the pressure of these sanctions. Following the selection of the Chinese-Singaporean consortium in the repeated tender for the execution of the Anaklia Port project in 2024, U.S. interest in this endeavor intensified further. The U.S. is concerned that the control of this critical infrastructure by a Chinese state-owned company could potentially compromise U.S. and NATO interests within the framework of the Black Sea security architecture. (U.S. Helsinki Commission, 2025).

It is noteworthy that the official visit of a U.S. delegation to Anaklia in March 2026 reaffirmed the project's highest strategic priority for Washington. During the visit, representatives from the U.S. State Department and the security sector inspected the ongoing construction and underscored that, notwithstanding the shift in investors, the port's operations must strictly adhere to international security standards (U.S. Department of State 2026).

U.S. diplomats explicitly stated that Washington will maintain continuous strategic oversight of the project to preclude any third-party exploitation of the port's infrastructure to the detriment of NATO's interests. This visit is widely interpreted as a decisive political signal that Anaklia remains an integral component of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture; it further demonstrates that Washington will not permit any erosion of Western logistical influence in the region (Civil.ge, 2026).

Other Interested Actors: Russia and China

The relationship between China (PRC) and Georgia was formalized and strengthened in 2023 when the countries signed an official strategic partnership, entailing a bilateral "commitment to expanding cooperation in the political, economic, and cultural fields, strengthening collaboration, deepening bilateral relations, and safeguarding regional and world peace, stability, and development together" (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Georgia, 2023).

While China initially represented an aggressive force rooted in revolutionary principles, since the 1970s, it has shifted toward forming a significantly more peaceful 'soft power' foreign policy, utilizing economic, political, and cultural diplomacy to expand its spheres of influence. In 2013, President Xi Jinping launched an ambitious infrastructural project – the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' – which later transformed into the global 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) (Arase, 2018). This initiative is a core component of China's ambitious foreign and economic policy, aimed at increasing its economic and political leverage. The 'Belt and Road Initiative' entails cooperation among approximately 80 countries across Eurasia, seeking to revive the 'New Silk Road'.

Within the scope of its strategic interests, China seeks to bring the maritime infrastructure of various countries under its sphere of influence. Several cases are noteworthy: the Chinese company COSCO Shipping has been operating in Varna, Bulgaria, for years through its representative office, ensuring a direct connection with the Port of Piraeus in Greece (which is controlled by China). Also notable is its interest in the Bulgarian port of 'Burgas'; it represents a necessary logistical and transport hub in Europe, providing Beijing with access to the European Union market (Kerano & Metodieva, 2025). Further evidence of China's strategic interests is the acquisition of a controlling stake (65%) in Turkey's Kumpart terminal within the Ambarli port complex in the Sea of Marmara (China Daily, 2015).

Within the framework of the BRI initiative, Georgia's Black Sea coast and, specifically, the Anaklia Deep Sea Port project, represent a strategically priority objective for Beijing, in terms of both economic and political significance.

The involvement in the Anaklia Deep Sea Port represents a "turning point" for cooperation between China and Georgia. Crucially, the project will significantly advance China's strategic interests, specifically the development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Middle Corridor, which connects East China to Europe via the Eurasian hinterland.

China had expressed interest in the Anaklia Port on previous occasions; however, its operational position was solidified in 2024 following the success of the Chinese-Singaporean consortium in the re-tender for the Anaklia Port project's implementation. The Chinese partner in the consortium, China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), is a state-owned enterprise of the People's Republic of China, sanctioned by the U.S. Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) since June 2021 (Pompeo, 2020; OFAC, 2021).

Despite winning the tender technically, the contractual agreement with the Chinese consortium has not yet been formalized by the Georgian government. It may be perceived that the Georgian party is refraining from cooperation with the Chinese company. The Anaklia Port is poised to become a "geopolitical instrument" for China as well as for Russia, allowing it to leverage critical infrastructure to strengthen its influence in the Caucasus region. In the view of several experts, the Anaklia port could become a "geopolitical tool" for China, allowing it to use critical infrastructure to strengthen its own and Russian influence in the Caucasus region.

China's involvement in the Anaklia Deep Sea Port project is a highly complex and geopolitically justified step, which unites important elements such as transport provision, geoeconomic influence, geostrategic positioning, and a policy of spatial reinforcement in the Black Sea region. Furthermore, the Chinese-operated Anaklia Port provides Beijing with a critical platform for intelligence gathering on NATO's naval movements and maritime operations in the Black Sea, thereby presenting a security risk to the Euro-Atlantic area (Popkhadze, 2025).

With respect to the interests of Russia, as one of the main actors in global politics, regarding the Anaklia Port, it is critically important for Russia to prevent the consolidation of Western influence near its borders, specifically in the Black Sea and the wider Black Sea region. Consequently, the Anaklia Port constitutes a "red flag" for Russia, as it threatens not only its economic interests but also poses a direct threat to its geopolitical power base, along with its established military and defensive posture. From an economic point of view, the Anaklia Port presents a significant competitive challenge to Russia's key maritime facilities, namely the ports of Novorossiysk and St. Petersburg, whose operational viability has been subject to considerable risk since the initiation of the Russia-Ukraine War (Kapanadz, 2024).

It is noteworthy that cooperation between Russia and China in political, economic, and military contexts has intensified since the Russia-Ukraine war of 2022. Trade turnover between China and Russia has increased by up to 30%. Against the backdrop of Western sanctions, China has emerged as Russia's only major political and economic ally. Since 2022, China has become Russia's "most important trading partner" (Ivaniadze, 2023).

In light of the strategic Russia-China partnership, the implementation of the Anaklia port under the auspices of Chinese operational control would potentially increase the geopolitical influence of China in the Black Sea region, and consequently that of Russia. This development could be definitively interpreted as an advantageous outcome for Moscow. It is worth noting that the Chinese company's interest in the Anaklia port is not a coincidence; it is directly linked to Russia's interests in ultimately establishing control over Georgia and undermining its European future. The Georgian government's announcement of a Chinese state-owned company as the winner of the tender represents an indirect realization of Russian interests.

Conclusion

The construction of the Anaklia Deep Sea Port currently remains the only viable project for tangibly enhancing Georgia's economic and geopolitical position. Anaklia possesses the potential to evolve into a vital hub for regional security operations, commercial trade routes, and humanitarian assistance. The port's construction is of inherent strategic interest to Georgia, as Anaklia Port is poised to be a game-changer by significantly enhancing Georgia's transit corridor function, effectively linking Central Asia and the European market across the Caspian and Black Seas. Anaklia will provide a significant boost to the Middle Corridor, also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route. The construction of the Anaklia Deep Sea Port is anticipated to confer multifaceted and substantial benefits for Georgia, given that it will substantially

enhance the country's capacity for freight transit and concurrently render the country significantly more attractive to global transport entities. Furthermore, the Port is positioned to catalyze the economic development of the wider region by establishing itself as a crucial transportation nexus for Georgia and its neighboring states, thereby fortifying commercial linkages and advancing regional integration.

Beyond the economic advantages, the Anaklia Port will significantly enhance Georgia's geopolitical importance. The country is positioned to become a crucial link in the transport corridor connecting Europe and Asia, which will subsequently revitalize its role in international trade and strengthen its position on the global stage. The Anaklia Deep Sea Port, serving as an alternative line for energy transmission routes, is set to enhance energy security for the country internally, as well as for its Western allies.

Considering that global power dynamics are increasingly defined by supervision over maritime chokepoints and critical trade infrastructure, the Anaklia Port constitutes more than a Georgian infrastructure project – it is a strategic asset for the country. As an invaluable asset, the Port, corresponding to its geopolitical location and role, is positioned at the nexus of interest for the main actors in global politics: on one side, the U.S. and NATO, and on the other, China.

For Georgia, it is critically important that this nationally important project be implemented with Western support, serving as a firm guarantee of national and strategic security. An Anaklia Port operating under the Western wing would act as a geopolitical shield for the country, protecting it from both Russia's energy and logistical hegemony.

Since the foreign policy of the United States aims to enhance the sovereign capacity of Georgia and maintain support for its Euro-Atlantic integration, the development of strategic infrastructure through the Western partnership is essential for reinforcing Georgia's sovereignty and its political resilience. The project will create a kind of multilateral interdependence network for Georgia with the US, the European Union, and NATO. Furthermore, such infrastructure serves to realize the nation's strategic objective, as stipulated by its constitution: the securing of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

Operating under Western patronage, the Anaklia port will function as a model of 'democratic infrastructure,' prioritizing international standards such as transparency, accountability, the fundamental norms of international law, and high security standards. This stands in direct opposition to the governance model offered by Chinese companies, which is often based on opaque obligations and strategic dependency.

Ultimately, it should be noted that developing the Anaklia port through a Western vector is the only path that will enable Georgia to truly fulfill its historical mission: to become a secure corridor connecting Europe and Asia, rather than a peripheral node under the influence of authoritarian states. Therefore, the active engagement of our Western partners is critically important to maintain the project's validity within the common architecture of Euro-Atlantic security.

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