They Lied to You! Defense & Security Works Best Without NATO.

Larry Johnson, Steve Jermy, Sakari Linden, and Levan Nikoleishvili explain why NATO is a bad idea for those who find themselves in between the great powers. They explore Finland’s NATO experience, Georgia’s constitutional commitments, armed neutrality and national resilience. A recorded contribution from Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto brings lessons from Indonesia and Southeast Asia. Recorded at the Tbilisi Forum on Neutrality on November 5, 2026, the discussion connects strategic independence with practical policy choices. Panel Links: Tbilisi Forum on Neutrality — programme and speakers: https://tfn.ge Neutrality Studies Links: Neutrality Studies Substack: https://pascallottaz.substack.com Support Neutrality Studies: https://neutralitystudies.com/donate Neutrality Studies shop: https://neutralitystudies.com/shop Time Stamps 00:00 Introductions: Alliances and Georgia’s strategic choices 05:44 Steve Jermy: Energy security in a multipolar world 12: 51 Larry Johnson: Financial independence and BRICS 20:07 Sakari Linden: Finland’s NATO experience 27:37 Georgia’s NATO aspirations and Article 78 35:04 Can neutrality protect a small state? 48:33 Armed neutrality, national resilience and economic security 57:44 Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto: Lessons from Indonesia

#Moderator

Hello, everybody. Thank you so much for coming back from lunch. It's always quite difficult to come back from lunch. My name is Giorgi Grimradze. It's my pleasure to moderate what I suppose will be a very interesting and fascinating discussion on this panel today. As I was introduced in Georgian, I'll translate that introduction. I'm the head of the analytical service at the Public Broadcaster here in Tbilisi. I'm a political scientist and theologian, and it's my pleasure to moderate this panel. So let me introduce our panelists as well. I will start from here. Mr. Sakari Linden, thank you so much for being with us.

A Finnish politician, political analyst, journalist, and former political adviser to the European Parliament. Then we have Levan Nikolayevich, representing our country, a PhD in political science, professor, retired colonel, former chief of the General Staff of the Georgian Armed Forces, deputy minister of defense, and director of the Defense Department at the National Security Council Secretariat. Thank you so much for joining us. Then, Larry Johnson. Thank you so much, Mr. Johnson, for joining us. A geopolitical analyst and former CIA intelligence officer and analyst. Sounds frightening. As you might know, the Russians have a saying: there are no former KGB officers. So thank you so much. Thank you so much for joining us.

And Larry Johnson is also a former counterterrorism officer at the U.S. Department of State. And retired Royal Navy Commodore Steve Jermy. Thank you so much, Mr. Jermy, for being with us. He is

a strategic analyst and author specializing in geopolitics, maritime strategy, and energy security. I would like to introduce our fifth panelist, who will be joining our panel and addressing our conference remotely. This is Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto from Indonesia, a doctoral scholar at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University and a lecturer in the Department of International Relations at the University of Indonesia.

So, I really appreciate it, Mr. Supriyanto. Unfortunately, he could not join us in person, but we sent him our questions, and he has kindly responded to them. We will present his response at the end of our panel. So, gentlemen, first of all, again, thank you so much for joining us. Thank you so much for coming to our country. You are very welcome here because we are discussing a very important issue for our country today. And what is more important, as was highlighted in the previous panel today, is that this is the first time in this country that we are discussing neutrality as an option.

Because, as you might know, we have Article 78 in our Constitution, which directs us toward the EU and NATO. This, in a way, constitutionally prohibits any discussion regarding our North Atlantic aspirations. But anyway, it is really important even to discuss how appropriate it is in the contemporary world to have this kind of article in the Constitution. On the other hand, I would like to frame our discussion around the Ukrainian conflict, which is, in some ways, a conflict between neutrality and membership in a military alliance. So this is also a very important framework for discussions about defense and security architecture on the one hand, and neutrality on the other.

So, Commodore Jeremy, let me start with you. My first question is based on the circumstances we face, the Ukrainian conflict, and the shifting world order—from a unipolar world toward I don't know what, because no one can say right now what the new world order could be ten years from now. We are living in a transition period. So my first question is about how relevant being a member of any military alliance still is in this transition. How attractive could NATO still be, for instance, to small countries like Georgia? Finland became a NATO member, for example. We'll discuss that with Mr. Linden. So, please.

#Speaker 1

Thank you, George, and thank you, Tbilisi, as well, for welcoming me. I was here in May of this year, and I've got my Tbilisi notebook, which I'm very proud of. Thank you. If I may, I'll start with a short introduction to how I see the situation.

#Moderator

You talked about multipolarity.

#Speaker 1

And some people say this is a world we're getting to. I think that's wrong. We're already in it. We're in a multipolar world, and the West is finding it difficult to understand that. But that's just the first level, because deeper down, there are two other levels that matter. And they matter in terms of answering your question. The second level is economics. And what we're also seeing in the world is more subtle, but it's a difference between, on the one hand, financial capitalism, which the West practices, which means deindustrialization, and, on the other hand, industrial capitalism, which is practiced particularly by China and Russia. And of those two models, I think industrial capitalism is winning out. But the last level—and you wouldn't expect me not to talk about energy—is energy.

And in your circumstances, it's important to understand energy. Energy is critical to everything. And we're moving from a world with high and increasing levels of cheap, plentiful, high-quality energy to a world where there is less energy, or it's scarce, expensive, and lower quality. So, to me, your critical relationships are firstly with Azerbaijan, which provides 40% of your energy, and then Russia. With that as context, that, to me, is the chart by which you should be navigating. I would be cautious about NATO. I have served in a NATO formation, and we used to joke that NATO stands for "No Ability to Organize." And I'm afraid NATO is not this great, powerful coalition. I was in Afghanistan, and in Afghanistan, after 20 years, NATO lost.

#Moderator

Yeah.

#Speaker 1

NATO lost against the Taliban, who were armed with rifles and IEDs. And anybody who thinks that NATO will be successful against Russia is in a dream world. So I'd be extremely cautious about NATO. But I would say, be cautious about any military relationship that involves confrontation with another great power. My strong instinct would be to make sure that I'm not in confrontational relationships. I'd be looking strongly for cooperative relationships, because I think ultimately NATO is likely to fail, and it will fail on the issue of Ukraine.

#Moderator

So, Mr. Jeremy, let me ask you another question about energy. You mentioned energy. Since World War II, energy and control over its transport routes and logistics have probably been among the biggest reasons for the conflicts we are facing even today. So, how safe is it to be on these routes? I mean, routes for transporting energy from the Caspian Sea, for instance, towards the European Union, and for trade in the other direction, because some European goods are transported towards Central Asia and farther into other Asian countries. I mean, being on these routes, is that still safe? Because we are watching what is happening in Iran. We are watching what has happened in Venezuela regarding energy resources, and also in Ukraine. Ukraine was on the route for energy

supplies from Russia towards Europe. And control over these routes was probably one of the motives for this conflict.

#Speaker 1

I think it is safe, provided that you get your foreign policy right. I mean, it's in your interests and in Azerbaijan's interests to have a good relationship. Yeah, definitely. And it's very important for both countries. But ultimately, without energy, everything else fails. And Europe is suffering from this. Europe has imposed sanctions on Russia, which I call boomerang sanctions because they're doing more damage to Europe than they are to Russia. So I would want an economy where I've got diversification in my energy supplies.

But I would also think of being on the road—or, as well as being a bridge, perhaps a crossroads is another way to think about your situation. That's a potentially very positive place to be if you can get the dynamics right and you're not involved in great power confrontation. I'd say it's more important not to be involved in great power confrontation than to worry about being on a route where energy is being transmitted or transported.

#Moderator

Thanks so much. Let me come back to the opportunities for Georgia in the second part of our panel. So, Mr. Johnson, my question is about that. I mentioned that the conflict in Ukraine is between neutrality and membership in a military alliance. This is probably one of the main reasons behind this conflict. And Russia has repeatedly demanded neutrality for Ukraine. Even in Georgia’s case, Russian representatives were demanding neutral status for Georgia back in 2007 and 2008. So, in this conflict, the idea of neutrality is quite demonized by the Western media and Western politicians, who say that this is a pro-Russian narrative, and so on.

And that also prevents any kind of discussion about neutrality in countries like Georgia. For instance, in Ukraine, it was quite seriously restricted from 2022 onward. People who said that we should adopt neutral status were considered totally pro-Russian, despite the possible treaty in Istanbul and so on. So this was also very demonized in Ukraine. How can we solve this problem? How can we deal with the issue of foreign policy orientation, which could be in the interests of a small country? I mean, how can we deal with this kind of bullying directed at one possible solution?

#Larry Johnson

First, let me go along with the response about “once CIA, always CIA.” I've also been accused of being a puppet of Putin. So I will admit today that I have the same relationship with Vladimir Putin that I do with the CIA, which is to say, absolutely nothing. So neither is sending me a paycheck. This will sound counterintuitive in a conference dedicated to neutrality, but the reality today is that Georgia can no longer afford to be neutral. You've got to make a choice. Are you going to be the

bitch of the West—in other words, a slave to the petrodollar? Or are you going to join the world we call multipolar? I think a more accurate term is "multinodal," because it's really a new, let's call it, neural network, where there is no one dominant pole.

But nonetheless, if Georgia is going to be its own economic power—and they'll say, "Well, that's counterintuitive. We're so small. How can we be an economic power?"—well, as long as you remain tied to the petrodollar, you are the bitch of the United States. They're going to tell you what to do. They're going to tell you who you can associate with. They're going to tell you who you can buy from. They're going to tell you what bank you can use. You know, at some point, people who are put in that kind of relationship—I won't even call it a codependent relationship; it's complete dependency—are going to stand up and say, "I've had enough. You're not going to tell me what to do anymore."

One of the advantages of what's being put in place, with Russia and China in the lead in creating BRICS and trying to create a new alternative global financial superstructure, is that no one country is going to dictate to the others what they can and cannot do. And so here's the counterintuitive part: you have to make a choice, but in making that choice, you empower yourself to be neutral. You don't have to choose to say, "I'm only going to align myself with you," or "I'm only going to align myself with you." But I am going to put myself into a position where I have some financial freedom and financial independence.

So that's the lesson of Ukraine, and I'll put it more broadly: it's the lesson of Panama and Manuel Noriega. It's the lesson of Libya with Muammar Gaddafi. It's the lesson of Iraq with Saddam Hussein. All three of them were, at one time, clients of my former organization, the Central Intelligence Agency. And they were made certain promises: "We've got your back." And then they learned that, well, that phrase, "We've got your back," is more like a prison rape scene. Okay? And you sit there and go, "Boy, that's a harsh thing to say," but that's the reality. Manuel Noriega wound up in prison.

Muammar Gaddafi wound up being raped and murdered after he had given up his weapons of mass destruction because the U.S. said, "Give those up, and we've got your back. We'll protect you." And Saddam Hussein—the United States supplied him with the chemical weapons that we then said we were looking for. We provided the damn chemical weapons, and then we accused him of being this outlaw. And he had trusted the United States for eight years. They encouraged him: "While you're at it, attack Iran." So my point is very simple. Yes, neutrality is where Georgia should be. But in getting to neutrality, you're going to have to make a choice: remain a slave to the petrodollar, or open up in a way that gives you some financial freedom and lets you control your own currency.

#Moderator

But let me stay with you. How do you do that? Because breaking free of the petrodollar, breaking free of the dollar system, is quite difficult even for big countries like Russia and China. Even BRICS has still not been able to provide any alternatives to the financial system and the dollar system provided by the United States. How could Georgia do that?

#Larry Johnson

I'm not saying it's easy, but it starts with the decision to say, "This is what we're going to do. We're now going to start establishing fuller banking relationships with China, for example." I mean, China right now has six of the ten largest banks in the world anyway. So by establishing banking relationships with China and opening up a diplomatic dialogue with China to say, "Look, in the future, we want to do transactions in our currency and yuan," you can circumvent the dollar system. You no longer have to go to the global market to buy dollars with your currency in order to make these financial transactions.

You know, right now, you're caught in between because a significant portion of your economic relationship is with Russia. That's manageable. Russia will say, "Okay, we'll set up under BRICS, dealing in rubles and the Georgian currency." The EU, that's a different problem. But that's a choice. I can't make that choice for Georgia. And I'm not going to come in here and tell you, "Oh, this is what you need to do." I'm just saying, if you're keen on neutrality, part of that neutrality—and it sounds counterintuitive—has got to start with you making a choice. Are we going to still be slaves to this petrodollar economic system? Or are we going to move toward a system where our own currency and our own resources will give us financial freedom?

#Pascal

Hey guys, Autumn Spirit is here, and we've launched our new merch. For instance, the monster from our Kill for Symposium has arrived on T-shirts, tumblers, and magnets. The little fella is really cute. Check it out. Every purchase directly helps us keep the lights on. So thanks a lot, and see you soon.

#Moderator

Thank you, sir.

#Moderator

So, Mr. Linden.

#Moderator

Let me ask you this question. You have discussed Finland's case, joining NATO after the war started in Ukraine. But what I would like to ask is: Do you have any optimism after the call by President

Stubb and Prime Minister Støre to President Putin to discuss bilateral relations? The official statement from the Finnish president's administration was that they, of course, expressed their support for Ukraine, but then they started to talk about being representatives of their countries, not of Europe.

They were distinguishing themselves from European policy. And they also distinguished themselves from the southern part of the Baltic Sea. They said that they are concerned about stability in the northern part of the Baltic Sea. So they started speaking about their own problems rather than the general problems of EU-Russian relations. Does this give us any kind of optimism that Finland, for instance, could somehow, someday return to neutrality? Because it is really very problematic for them to have such a long border with Russia, as we do. And this is a huge neighbor of yours.

#Speaker 2

Thank you. I'm kind of optimistic that one day Finland could go back to the path of neutrality. And maybe it will be forced to take that path by geopolitical realities. But unfortunately, in my view, that doesn't have anything to do with the call from the president of Finland, Alexander Stubb, to the president of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin. Alexander Stubb is a liberal globalist, and throughout his political career, he has always followed the official foreign and security policy line of the United States. As far as I know, Alexander Stubb has opposed Finland's membership in NATO for only three weeks during his entire political career.

And that was in March 2022. That coincided with the view of the U.S. president, Joe Biden, that there was a danger that the war in Ukraine could expand to other countries and that NATO should not take any new members. So he's always following the U.S. line. And my assessment is that, with the call to Putin, Stubb wanted to please President Trump in the U.S. and help organize the peace negotiations in the United Arab Emirates. And I'm afraid that, in light of the midterm election results in the U.S., Alexander Stubb's stance has already changed, favoring more escalation in Ukraine. We will see, but that's my strong assessment.

#Moderator

But what can you say about society in Finland? I mean, do you have any polls? Do you have any kind of, I don't know, data on which you can base an assessment of whether society is more pro-NATO or more pro-neutrality, and so on? Because, as I understand from what you discussed in the very first panel, the consequences of Finland joining NATO are significant.

#Speaker 2

I must remind you that just before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, almost 80% of Finns opposed Finland joining NATO. And just a few months after the start of the war in Ukraine, the tables had completely turned. Somewhere between 70% and 80% of Finns supported Finland

joining NATO. The start of the Ukraine war was accompanied by a huge disinformation and propaganda campaign by the Finnish mainstream media, and they weaponized Western identity. They wanted to send the message that in order to be a good European, a good Westerner, you have to join all those institutions of the unipolar world. And they avoided discussing any geopolitical root causes of the conflict in Ukraine, and so on. At the moment, support for NATO has diminished a little bit, but if I remember the opinion poll results correctly, it's still about 60%.

But one part of this propaganda and disinformation from the mainstream media has involved creating the impression that a unipolar world still exists, and that Finland, by joining NATO, can do whatever it wants. It can provoke its great-power neighbor however it wants, and eventually Uncle Sam will come and rescue Finland if it gets into trouble. But what we see at the moment, and what has been discussed in the U.S. since Barack Obama's first term as president, is that the U.S. doesn't see Europe as the most important region in the world anymore. It has to concentrate its troops in East Asia and also in the Middle East. They are having problems at the moment, and they are withdrawing their troops. So, in a way, Finnish people were betrayed by our political class, which promised that the U.S. would come to the rescue, because that's not happening. Yeah, so that's the situation in Finland at the moment.

#Moderator

Thank you. Thank you so much. Mr. Levan, a question. Our country has two occupied regions. In my view, aspiring to NATO membership means an endless conflict with the country with which we share our longest border. This seems obvious to me, especially based on the experience in Ukraine. On the other hand, this aspiration is in our constitution, as I mentioned at the very beginning. So what is your position here? What is the solution for us? And how feasible is neutrality, in your view? Please.

#Speaker 3

Thank you very much. First of all, I'd like to thank our panel members. It's a really great pleasure for me to be here with you. And let me also say a couple of words. Why is our political party thinking this way? How can we achieve the main goal? You know, in 2028 we have elections, and, of course, as a political party, we want to win some seats in parliament. But our main strategy and tactic is to tell society the truth about what's going on in the world and how realistic it is for Georgia to join NATO or the EU. That's very important. Of course, you may think that this is the position of a political party. Yes, it is.

But we hope that with this position, we will achieve our goal. Let's start with the idea of joining NATO. The idea of Georgia joining NATO has been unrealistic, and that's the truth. It has been promised for a long time, and more and more people no longer believe in Euro-Atlantic integration. Only a few small groups still support it, mainly because they do not fully understand what the North Atlantic Alliance really is and what obligations and challenges it would bring to our country. There is a real dilemma we have to face. Is it good for Georgia to join NATO when 20% of its territory is

occupied? On the one hand, joining could mean direct conflict and getting involved in a war with Russia.

And on the other hand, joining without Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region basically means losing these territories forever and accepting their annexation. Besides this, there is another major question: does NATO also want Georgia to join? Right now, it's almost impossible for all NATO members to agree to accept Georgia. The tragic experience of Ukraine clearly shows what happens when a country follows the orders of outside forces and acts based on foreign interests. Georgia's main goal is to avoid becoming a geopolitical battlefield for global powers. Instead, our goal should be to make Georgia a center of political stability, lasting peace, and economic growth. That's my short answer to this.

#Moderator

So, do you have any ideas about Article 78? How can we solve this issue? Do you have a vision for how to address it?

#Speaker 3

You know what? When the decision was made to put this article in the Constitution, it was a completely different world, and the situation was different. And it was really a long time ago. Now the situation has changed, and we have to be realistic and look at what's going on in the world, around us, and in the region. And we have to think about how to develop our country. What's important for our country? Is it realistic to join NATO and the EU? It's clear that it's not realistic. But what do we have to do to make our country better? I really think the answer is neutrality.

Because then we will have a real chance not to follow the dictates of global actors and powerful countries. We will have the chance and opportunity to decide for ourselves what we need for our country and what will be better for our country. And finally, we will have a real chance to pursue our national interests. That's why we have to think about how to change this article. This article was written by people, and it can also be changed by people.

#Moderator

Thank you so much. By the way, I will use this opportunity to ask Mr. Linden a question from our audience. This is the same question for you about Article 78. You probably know what this article is about, and Mr. Levan has already described it. I will read the last part of this question because it gives some context for this article. Finally, in your opinion, what steps could be taken to remove this article from the Constitution, and when would be the best time to do so?

#Speaker 2

Without knowing too much about your constitutional law here, I think political forces advocating for neutrality just have to make the case for removing that article from the Constitution and campaign very hard for that. But also, from a legal and political point of view, I don't see too much urgency. Because if the political forces in power in Georgia favor neutrality, they can just freeze the situation and not take steps toward the goal of that article. And the political forces favoring neutrality can just wait for their moment, in my view.

#Moderator

Thank you. Thank you so much, Mr. Lindner. So, gentlemen, I would like to speak generally about the possibility of neutrality for Georgia as a country, as a solution. But first of all, I would like to give some brief context about our country and where we live, as I understand it. I have already mentioned that this is a transitional period from unipolarity toward multipolarity, and we agreed on that. Some people say that this could take the form of macro-regions, each with its own center of gravity, etc. So, a lot of people do consider the Caucasus—the South Caucasus and the Caucasus as a whole—to be somehow becoming part of a macro-region with Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea, the eastern part of the Black Sea, etc.

And here we can see that three major powers—Russia, Turkey, and Iran—are competing with each other. These countries are balancing each other in our country. And the United States also has a stake in our region. China has its stakes in our region, etc. So, to what extent could neutrality be an option for a small country like Georgia, given these big players? Despite Russia demanding neutrality, the big powers are always asking small countries to choose a side in their competition. On the one hand, how can we survive these demands to choose a side? And on the other hand, how can we push our approach toward neutrality? Mr. Gemini, please.

#Speaker 1

Yeah, I think that's a very good question. I think the danger is choosing a side. I could not be firmer in my view that choosing a side is a bad idea, especially a geopolitical side at a time of geopolitical tension between the great powers.

#Moderator

Yeah, as we see in Ukraine, for instance.

#Speaker 1

Yeah, I mean, if you want to look at the non-NATO, non-neutral option, then you don't have to look much further than Ukraine. Ukraine isn't a failing state. It's a failed state. It's destroyed economically. I wonder whether it will ever recover. I can imagine Novorossiya will recover, but I wonder about the rest of Ukraine, because who in Europe can afford to pay for its reconstruction?

So emotionally, that's not a good place to be. But thinking strategically, you're in an interesting time. We are all in an interesting time. And I think what's needed here is really clear strategic thinking. What I often say about the West is that, if you look at the NATO-Ukraine war, Western operations are being guided by a political narrative, and Russian operations are being guided by a military strategy.

And the military strategy is winning, and it's winning because it's thought through. I won't take you through that strategy, but I'm pretty clear on it. And the problem with the political narrative is that it's very febrile and changes. So, you know, it's always changing. The objectives are changing, and it depends on the political atmosphere. One thing is clear, though: the United States is extracting itself from Europe. It's expecting Europe to pay for itself. So I would be working on the basis that the United States will be an important relationship, but there are other equally important relationships, not least of which is Russia, of course.

This is stating the obvious, but it's important to understand it. So I think what's really needed is a very clear strategic analysis. That's an analysis that should be done with the head and not the heart. It should be done strategically rather than ideologically. And you should put ideology aside because, ultimately, your national security will depend on that. I do think, though, that there are opportunities. I look at Azerbaijan's model, which is sort of strategic autonomy and looking in different directions. That's encouraging. It's not yet neutrality. Whether it will be neutrality, I don't know. And I wouldn't say that you have to move to neutrality in one step.

But as a destination, I think that would be a good thing to work on. I also think that we will soon see the end of the Russia-Ukraine war, because it seems to me that Ukraine is close to defeat. And at that stage, Ukraine's only option in what will be a very difficult post-war period will be neutrality. There is no chance of security guarantees for Ukraine. The Europeans are too weak to provide them, and the Americans don't want to provide them. So neutrality is their only option. It's much better to get to neutrality now rather than have the whole of your state destroyed for larger geopolitical reasons that you really don't want to be part of.

#Moderator

Thank you so much, Miss Jeremy. So, Miss Johnson, the same question, actually, but put this way: neutrality needs some kind of recognition and security guarantees from the big players in the neighborhood who have a stake in this territory. So, leaving aside the US and China for now, to what extent could Russia, Turkey, and Iran agree on neutral status for countries in the South Caucasus? In your view, whether we're talking about Armenia or Georgia, I mean, the South Caucasus has been a field of competition for these powers. To what extent could they agree on the neutrality of any of these small states in the region?

#Larry Johnson

Sorry about that. I want to follow up on what Steve said about thinking with the head, not the heart. Georgia needs to ask itself a question: Why does the United States want a relationship with you? I mean, it's not like you have this abundance of natural resources that the United States needs. Now, Georgians are charming people. You've got great food. But there's nothing that makes you so unique that the United States absolutely should have that relationship. And yet, the United States has been treating you like you're the only woman on a desert island, with a hundred men chasing you around, wanting to have this relationship. And let me suggest that they're going to use you the same way they've used Ukraine. And Ukraine has paid an enormous bill: at least 1.5 million men dead. At least. And it's probably higher.

And for what purpose? The United States wants to use Georgia for one simple reason: as a battering ram to try to destroy Russia. Now you ask, well, why should Georgia have a relationship with Russia? Oh, I don't know. There was this guy named Joseph Stalin who happened to be from Georgia. I seem to recall he played a fairly influential role in the history of the Soviet Union. So you've got some natural relationships that you have to deal with. You've got to deal with the Turks. You dealt with that thing called the Ottoman Empire for several years. The Russians have a natural relationship with you. My God, the number of Russian men who have married Georgian women. And, you know, if you want to get a decent meal in Russia, you go to the house of one of those guys because their wives cook up an incredible Georgian spread.

And similarly with Iran. They're in the neighborhood. So this notion of neutrality is not so much about trying to get yourself embroiled in these other conflicts. You have to step back and think with your head. Where do our national interests as Georgians lie? We want to have good relations with Russia. We want to have good relations with Turkey. We want to have good relations with Iran. It'd be nice to have relations with the United States, but understand that the United States isn't coming at this with your best interests at heart. The United States is looking at it only in terms of, "How is it going to benefit us, and how can we use you?" So that's where I come back. I think Steve's point was spot on. Think with the head, not with the heart.

#Moderator

So thank you. Thanks so much. I do agree with both of you on these issues. And I think that, even more, these three countries probably could be really, really interested in a neutral status for Georgia and Armenia, and Azerbaijan as well, because any two of them—whether it is Russia and Iran, Russia and Turkey, or Turkey and Iran—oppose the third country's exclusive influence in the region. So their interest in balancing each other is really an argument for neutrality for these countries that are between these three big powers.

So, Mr. Linden, I would like to ask you, from different perspectives, how effective is NATO as a means of defense? And I'm asking you that because we are observing what is happening in Ukraine, and I do believe that Article 5 of NATO is active in Ukraine, because this article does not require all the member states to send troops into the conflict. Some kind of aid is required under Article 5 of

NATO, so they are doing everything they can for Ukraine. They're sending money, they're sending information, they're even sending troops somehow, and they're sending military equipment and everything. So what would be different if, theoretically, conflicts emerged on NATO territory, in Finland or in the Baltic states? What would be different? How much more effective could NATO be than it is in Ukraine?

#Speaker 2

I think NATO's deterrence when it comes to defending Finland is ineffective. The Finnish political class, our foreign and security policy leaders, said when applying for NATO membership that we were in an insecure situation and that was why we had to join NATO. And Finland was already a member of the European Union at that time. So the only difference NATO membership made for Finland was the involvement of the United States. But as I've already stated, the interests of the United States are no longer in Europe, but mainly in East Asia and in the Americas.

All European NATO members' militaries are quite weak. And especially considering that they would have to deploy their troops to Finnish territory, it's almost technically impossible. But what NATO can do for Finland—and this is very negative—is to start deploying military infrastructure on Finnish territory, because Finland is situated next to two of Russia's three most strategic centers: Murmansk and St. Petersburg. So at some point, if the Western powers' deterrence in Finland grows, it could force Russia to...

#Speaker 2

rearrange its deterrence with regard to Finnish territory.

#Moderator

Thank you. Thank you so much. I'm sorry, I'm receiving questions on my phone through our QR code, so that's why I'm looking at my phone. But just one question. This is kind of a technical issue, but it's very important. How could our defense structure and our security architecture be built up under neutrality? What is your point of view?

#Speaker 3

Again, when you're discussing the status of neutrality, many people who are trying to argue against us think that it automatically means not having an army or any kind of defense system.

#Speaker 2

Of course, that's not true.

#Speaker 3

Any state, any country has the right to have its own defense system and to build its own security and defense architecture. So, with your permission, I have, of course, thought a lot about what kind of system we should have, and I have put some notes on paper. This is open to discussion. I'd be more than happy to hear some arguments about this. It's, let's say, a starting point. But first of all, I can assure you that Georgia definitely needs an army, whether it is a neutral country or not. But there are some differences. The concept of neutrality means, first of all, refusing to join military blocs while developing a strong national defense system at the same time.

With this approach, Georgia aims to avoid getting involved in geopolitical conflicts and to ensure the protection of its sovereignty. The country's strategy focuses on maintaining freedom and pursuing a pragmatic policy. From a military standpoint, it's effective to use a strategy that strengthens its defense potential so much that the military, financial, and political costs of an attack become unacceptably high for any potential aggressor. This approach is a powerful mechanism for preventing war and maintaining peace.

In the face of modern hybrid threats, total defense combines three main components. Military defense includes developing rapid reaction forces, implementing air and coastal defense systems, and mastering the latest anti-drone and electronic warfare technologies. Civil defense involves public readiness for crises, developing shelter infrastructure, ensuring cybersecurity, and protecting vital energy and logistics facilities. The reserve system involves forming a universal reserve that strengthens society’s resilience, increases civic responsibility, and creates a barrier against information warfare.

#Moderator

Thank you so much, Batono Levan.

#Speaker 3

And what's also very important, national defense capability is closely linked to economic strength. Investing in the defense sector, encouraging the local military industry, and introducing innovations are sources of economic stimulus and job creation. Additionally, diversifying trade routes and utilizing energy potential are important. Under neutrality, Georgia's geoeconomic role also grows, and the country is becoming an impartial and safe transit and logistics hub. This factor gives global actors a pragmatic interest in Georgia's stability. Neutrality also creates space for constructive diplomacy and an economically strong, protected democratic state, as well as conditions in which Georgia's territories can be restored through dialogue.

Our jurisdiction does not apply there. This naturally becomes attractive to the population living beyond the occupation line. Ensuring welfare and security is the most effective tool for restoring

trust. Another main point: not joining any military blocs gives us the possibility of having relations and cooperating with any country. Not joining NATO does not mean that we cannot have relations with NATO or with other countries. But again, these relations must be based on our own interests—our national interests. Thank you.

#Moderator

Thank you. Thank you so much. Mr. Johnson, there is a question for you from the audience. Let me read it. How realistic is the successful implementation of the Middle Corridor project against the backdrop of a growing U.S.-China geopolitical confrontation? And to what extent will Washington be interested in securing direct or indirect influence over this transit route? The first part is: How realistic is the successful implementation of the Middle Corridor project during the growing U.S.-China geopolitical confrontation? This is the first part of the question. And then, to what extent will Washington be interested in securing direct or indirect influence over this transit route?

#Larry Johnson

Sorry about that. We're actually at a unique period in history where opportunities are being created. The U.S. ability to confront China is diminishing, I think, with each passing day. The United States lives with the fantasy that we're still the dominant global economic power. Going back to Steve's remarks at the outset about the financialization of GDP versus industrialization, we've seen in the war in Ukraine a stark reminder of the difference. The United States has run out of PAC-3 missiles. Those are the missiles fired by the Patriot missile battery. Well, it's just a matter of, "Let's appropriate the money. We'll buy some more." Only one little problem: China controls the rare earth minerals that are used to make the magnets that are used in the guidance system to take the PAC-3 to where it has, you know, maybe one chance in ten of hitting an inbound ballistic missile.

And China said, "We're not selling you any more." So it doesn't matter how much money the United States comes up with. As long as China's got that industrial base, you can have all the dollars in the world, but that doesn't buy you rare earth minerals. And if you think, "Well, we'll just go out and invest in that," that's not how the world works. Right now, the Pentagon's putting billions of dollars into developing rare earth minerals. The problem is the processing. It takes years to develop that. The Chinese foresaw this, and they developed it. So that's why I said it creates opportunities for Georgia. While the United States pretends it's in a position to exert leverage over you, the reality is that China's relative independence gives Georgia, I think, more leeway to negotiate and say, "You know what? You're not the only date in town."

#Moderator

Thank you so much. Gentlemen, I would like to remind you that we have a fifth panelist, Mr. Ciprianto, who has provided a video address. Before we play this video, let me thank you so much for joining us, for coming to this country, and for sharing your thoughts and ideas with us. And of

course, I would like to thank the organizers for giving me this opportunity to discuss these issues with you. Thank you so much. And please, let's play the video.

#Moderator

Hello, my name is Ristian Adriandi Suprianto. I'm a lecturer in international relations at the University of Indonesia. I'm very glad to join this conference and share my thoughts on neutrality and how it is important not only to Georgia but also to other countries. And I would like to reflect on the experiences of Southeast Asia, especially my country, Indonesia, and how they can be relevant to Georgia's thinking and understanding of neutrality. I think there are several layers to your question. Number one is the geopolitical competition and even rivalry that you mentioned. I think, you know, we talk about geopolitical competition because it is global in scale.

And why is it global? I think it's because of the role of the great powers, including superpowers, right? And so that's number one. The great powers have their own national interests that are in opposition to one another. They pursue their own selfish national interests, as all countries do. But number two, I think this is where the problem is: the pursuit of national interests can contradict, trample on, or sideline international law. So when you have national interests that are not consistent with international law, then you have the dismantling of international and global stability, right? So what options do countries like Georgia and other countries have in this case?

Well, neutrality has a broad definition, but it can also be narrow. Again, the point is, number one, Georgia should not base its policy on the policies of other countries. Number two, Georgia should not involve itself in someone else's war. So, in this case, I think Georgia should weigh all the options it has. And most importantly, I think Georgia's priority here is to remain independent, right? In order for Georgia to remain independent, it must be able to defend its sovereignty, number one. And two, it has to have other countries respect Georgia's sovereignty. And I think whether to choose neutrality or not depends on these considerations. To what extent does neutrality help secure, help guarantee Georgia's independence and sovereignty?

I think when countries violate international law, they commit acts of aggression, including against Georgia. I don't think neutrality for neutrality's sake will be useful in this case. However, if Georgia can promote more inclusive international cooperation and collaboration to ensure that Georgia has a voice and that other countries respect Georgia's independence and, importantly, sovereignty, I think this is something that Georgia can work out not only with its immediate neighbors but also with other countries beyond the Caucasus. I think, again, Georgia has political options for collaborating with countries within the Caucasus and beyond to stress the importance of international law, number one.

And number two is to speak truth to power. International law is configured so that it not only applies to small states and middle powers, but also holds great powers to account. So Georgia, in cooperation with other countries, should also speak out against actions by the great powers that

may be inconsistent with international law. I think formal alliances are only one way of pursuing security, but there are other ways. One way that my country follows is non-alignment. It doesn't mean that Indonesia is always neutral in each and every case of an international dispute or international problem. You cannot be neutral when a country violates international law.

So we are not talking about neutrality in terms of violations of international law. But when you talk about non-alignment, you mean that you do not bind yourself to commitments in a military alliance with another country. Because once you enter into an alliance, you might be subject not only to your own interests but also to the interests of the country that leads that alliance. So that is something for Georgia to decide. But I think Georgia's main point here is to remain independent. Whether that independence is best secured through alliances or through non-alignment, it is up to Georgia's people to decide. But judging from what is happening at the moment, not just in Europe but also in the Middle East, alliances are not always the best way for you to preserve national sovereignty and defend your independence.

I think one word that is relevant to neutrality or non-alignment here is pragmatism. I think the policy of non-alignment or neutrality must rest on pragmatism. It is your own national interest that is at stake. That is the priority here. So, by having a non-aligned or neutral foreign policy, you can make an objective assessment of what your national economic interests are. You do not politicize or geopoliticize economic decisions, right? When you are in an alliance, on the other hand, you have to take the interests of your allies into account as well. And that might jeopardize your ability to pursue your own national economic interests. So I think what is happening at the moment is deglobalization.

So globalization is under attack because some countries feel that their national interests are threatened by the economic policies of another country. The main priority here is to maximize national independence, including independence in economic policymaking. And so, by having a non-aligned foreign policy, Georgia can avoid the politicization or geopoliticization of its own economic interests and economic cooperation with other countries. In today's globalized world, supply chains are already integrated across many countries. So having an economic policy that is not beholden to alliance considerations, I think, allows a country like Georgia to cooperate and collaborate with all sides, right? It doesn't discriminate against any side based on political prejudices or political interests dictated by other countries, right?

So that's number one. Number two, I think Southeast Asia, especially my country, Indonesia, is a good example of this, where it tries to balance the interests of all parties. It doesn't want to have a hostile or discriminatory policy against any country, including China and America. So it just bases its own policies on its own national interests in relation to America and China. So I think Georgia can, to some extent, maintain this kind of policy. It's close to Russia, of course. Russia may be Georgia's largest trading partner, but Georgia shouldn't limit its options to Russia. It must also open up other options with the European Union, with Turkey, with the Western Hemisphere. So building as many options as possible will be in Georgia's best interest, I think. Thank you.

#Moderator

Thank you, Mr. Mark.

#Moderator

Once again, thank you so much, gentlemen. We will have a very short break before today's final panel. Please stay with us. Thank you.