The Path to Peace for Eurasia goes through Georgia

Can neutrality help Georgia reduce external tensions and rebuild trust across territorial divisions? James W. Carden, Konstantin Zghenti, Larry Johnson and Rein Müllerson discuss diplomacy with Russia, possible American reactions, economic preparation and the lessons they draw from Ukraine. They consider Austria's experience, Georgia's regional position and the obstacles to reconciliation. Recorded at the Tbilisi Forum on Neutrality on November 5, 2026, this closing panel examines how a small state might pursue sovereignty, cooperation and peace amid competing international pressures. 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: How would Washington and Moscow react? 07:20 Larry Johnson: Preparing economically for neutrality 10:56 Rein Müllerson: Great power interests in the Caucasus 18:02 Konstantin Zghenti: Austria's example and Georgia's own path 20:48 James W. Carden: Lessons from Ukraine 24:08 Territorial reconciliation, sovereignty and foreign policy 31:28 Audience question: The war in Ukraine and its possible outcome 36:52 Closing reflections: Peace, neutrality and frozen conflicts

#Moderator

Greetings, gentlemen and ladies. This is the fourth panel, the last panel of the day. Our main topic of discussion is neutrality as a tool to decrease, de-escalate, and defuse tensions, both externally and internally. Joining us for this discussion are James W. Carden, the former advisor to the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission and to the Special Representative for Global Intergovernmental Affairs at the State Department, and Ambassador Konstantin Jarenty, a career diplomat, former ambassador of Georgia to Austria, Hungary, and Kuwait, a foreign affairs advisor, and a member of the political party United Neutral Georgia. Mr. Johnson and Mr. Muellersen have already been introduced, and I'm sure you're all well aware of their credentials. Gentlemen, the main thesis of today's conference is peace and cooperation. So I was wondering: what would the reaction of D.C. and the Kremlin be if Georgia decided to declare neutrality? Mr. Carden, I would like to hear from you first, sir.

#Speaker 1

Okay, thank you all very much. It's a real pleasure to be on this panel. You know what? Before I answer that question, though, I think that, you know, as an American, I feel kind of duty-bound to respond to the comments of Professor Miranda, who was prevented from traveling because of

pressure from our government in the United States. And I just want to go on record as saying I think that's atrocious. I think that's shameful. And there's no strategic, moral, or military reason that we should be involving civilians in this unjust war. And so I just wanted to begin with that.

In terms of the response from Washington and Moscow, should Georgia declare neutrality, you'll get a much more favorable reaction from Moscow than you will from Washington. To declare yourself neutral, to declare yourself independent from the Washington-sponsored binary of the democracies versus the authoritarians, is a great sin in the eyes of the Washington political establishment. I think that Moscow would probably welcome Georgian neutrality. It certainly did its best to encourage Ukraine to choose a non-NATO, neutral path. And the Ukrainians stupidly took the advice coming from Washington. And we've seen how that has tragically played out.

#Moderator

Unfortunately, that's true. Mr. Ambassador, if we could turn to you, sir, what are your thoughts on the same matter?

#Speaker 2

Thank you. First of all, I want to thank the organizers and the audience. I'm glad to be here. I wasn't going to bring this up, but since my colleague mentioned Washington, Moscow, and the conflicts, I remember that in 1993, when we lost Abkhazia, I was in the United States at Harvard University. There was a discussion about Shevardnadze saying that we had lost the war to Russia, not to Abkhazia. Kozyrev was visiting the United States at that time, and Americans were telling me, “Look, Kozyrev is saying that it's not true,” and so on.

And I was asking, “Is that the official position or your position as scientists?” Later, I read Strobe Talbott’s book, The Russia Hand, where he writes that after the war in Abkhazia, Shevardnadze sent two Georgian diplomats to the United States, to the Clinton administration. He writes that he and President Clinton were thinking about how to respond when the Georgians asked, “Why didn’t you help us when we were at war with Russia and they were taking Abkhazia?” They were thinking about what to tell the Georgians, but they were very happy that Shevardnadze’s letter said—and the Georgian diplomats also told them verbally—that the most important thing for Georgia at that moment was the victory of Russian democracy under Yeltsin.

This was the government’s position at that time, as Strobe Talbott writes in his book. So that means it depends on which government is in power in Russia and the United States, on the general situation, and on the situation surrounding the conflict. That’s very important, of course. And when we meet people here in Georgia, they also ask us, “How can we be neutral with Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region? It’s impossible,” they say. And my colleagues and I always answer that the main

thing for ending the occupation is to talk with the occupant, or occupier, whatever you want to call them. Without this, dialogue or negotiation is impossible. We all agree that we cannot do this through military force.

Inside Georgia and outside Georgia, everyone agrees on this. So the only way is the diplomatic way, the way of negotiation. First of all, you must negotiate with Russia, of course. This is for sure. Other countries—leading world powers and states in the region—will also participate in this, for sure. And international participation is very important. But maybe we can also have some dialogue and negotiations with Russia alone. Without Russia, it's impossible. And this is, you know, the point that people here in Georgia don't like. But what can we do? It's based on realpolitik. So this is the way. And I think the time will come when we can do this. We will do this. I'm sure we will. Thank you.

#Moderator

Perfect. Mr. Johnson, would you care to share any thoughts on this matter? Maybe you could tell us about the possible reactions in D.C. if Georgia declares neutrality.

#Larry Johnson

First, let me apologize up front for wearing the shirt. But I attended a previous conference where I went more conventional with a suit and tie, and I got chastised: "Where's your shirt?" So I said, "Okay," and opted for the Florida shirt. When I was in Moscow a little over a month ago, I was with Alastair Crooke, John Mearsheimer, and Judge Napolitano. We were invited to have dinner with Sergei Lavrov and other members of the foreign ministry. So I thought, "I'm taking Lavrov a shirt." So I got him a shirt similar to this one, and it was brand new. When he came in, I presented it to him, and he goes, "Is this used?" I go, "No, it's brand new." So maybe one of these days we'll see him wear it.

Georgia should follow the rule of thumb for somebody who wants to jump out of an airplane: have a parachute, and make sure you've packed your own parachute. Don't trust the United States to pack your parachute, because you may jump out of the plane and find out the chute doesn't work. The reason I'm saying this is because of what we talked about in the previous session: Georgia needs to make a choice. Is it going to continue to be subject to the petrodollar system, or is it going to carve out a path of independence—financial independence—while still, by virtue of its size, depending on international trade with other countries?

The question is, have you put in place the infrastructure and the relationships required to maintain a stance of neutrality? Because I think all of you, or at least most of you, understand that if Georgia declares neutrality without having made that preparation, the United States will go to great lengths to make your life miserable and make you regret that choice. However, you can prepare in advance.

And what am I talking about? Talk to the Russians, talk to the Chinese. Talk to the Russian foreign minister, talk to Wang Yi or his representative, and begin charting out how Georgia can integrate itself into a BRICS system. And don't advertise it.

You know, I'm sure my old outfit will be collecting on that and providing intelligence back to headquarters to say, "Looks like Georgia is going to jump ship." But this is the critical step you must take if you're going to move towards full neutrality, where you don't have to be in anyone's camp. The advantage of, if you will, the BRICS approach is that, if you've watched Brazil or you've watched India, there is no coherent system where everybody's forced to toe one single line, because both India and Brazil have been pursuing some of their own independent policies. But within that structure, there's at least the willingness to recognize that Georgia, as a sovereign country, is entitled to make decisions that are in the interest of its people.

#Moderator

Mr. Millerson, let's take a more specific regional approach, with your permission, obviously. On the one hand, we have the precedent of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, when the largest state in the South Caucasus managed to restore its territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders. On the other hand, most probably, the war in Ukraine is going to end with borders being changed by force in Europe for the first time since 1945, if we exclude Yugoslavia, obviously. So, given this regional context, how would Georgia be able to use neutrality as a tool to navigate safely through this huge geopolitical fragmentation that we're witnessing?

#Speaker 3

It's a very big question for us to answer briefly—impossible, even. Listening to the previous panel, I heard it said that Georgia has to think with its head, not with its heart. Maybe that's difficult for Georgians, because I believe they think with their hearts very often. And that's a good thing, of course, but it can be abused by others sometimes. And now, Shevardnadze was mentioned, and I recalled an interesting conversation in Baku in the autumn of 1994. I headed a small UN fact-finding mission to Azerbaijan and Armenia then. I was traveling via Tbilisi because it wasn't possible to travel directly between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

And in Baku, among other high officials, I met the U.S. ambassador, Richard Kauzlarich. I don't know whether you remember such a diplomat. And I asked him directly, “What are the U.S. interests in the Caucasus?” And his response was quite interesting and, I believe, correct. “In Armenia,” he told me, “it's the Armenians, because there are a lot of Armenians in the United States, and they can influence party politics and elections, probably. Not only in the U.S.—in France even more, probably.” And what are the interests of the U.S. in Azerbaijan? Oil and gas—also quite obvious. And what are the interests of the U.S. in Georgia?

The answer was, “Shevardnadze.” I don't understand why Shevardnadze in particular, but probably because there is no oil and gas in Georgia, and there are not enough Georgians living in the United States to influence elections there. So the interest was only in this person who had been negotiating with the United States on behalf of the Soviet Union. Therefore, Shevardnadze was important from the point of view of the U.S. ambassador to Baku. This means, in my opinion, that there is no specific U.S. interest in Georgia. There is not enough oil or gas, and there are not enough Georgians in the U.S. to make the U.S. interested in Georgia.

The only interest would be geopolitical, nevertheless, because Georgia is close to Russia. And the United States would be interested in Estonia, if I may take my country as an example, only because Estonia is next to Russia. If Estonia were somewhere like Western Samoa, there wouldn't be any interest in Estonia in the United States, although there are quite a few Estonians living in America. Now, what are Russia's interests in Georgia? First of all, I believe that people in Russia probably respect Georgians quite a lot. This goes back to history. In Russia, there is an underground station, and…

#Speaker 3

During the 1812 war with Napoleon, Georgians played an important role. During the Second World War as well. So maybe there is an interest in Georgia, not only thinking with the heart but with the head as well, or vice versa. And for Russia, it is important to have a neutral Georgia, in my opinion. Russia is not against Georgia’s neutrality, especially now that Russia is also advocating neutrality for Ukraine. It may be an additional argument in favor of recognizing Georgia’s neutrality as well.

#Pascal

Hey guys, Autumn Spirit is here, and we’ve launched our new merch. For instance, the monster from our Kilt 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

Sure. Mr. Johnson, is there anything you'd like to add on this matter? Sure. So let's move forward. We've heard discussions in the previous panels about the experience of other states when it comes to neutrality. One of the examples mentioned was Austria and its permanent neutrality. Mr. Ambassador, you have also served in Austria. Could you please share your insights and overall impressions from seeing this ancient nation go through this diplomatic effort, sir?

#Speaker 2

Thank you. While Professor Gertner was speaking today about Austria, I thought that I could not say more about Austria than he knows. He mentioned that he discusses 21 kinds of neutrality with his students, including Austria's, as I remember. And, of course, I agree with him. I don't want to compare the neutrality of Georgia with the neutrality of Austria, or even Switzerland or Turkmenistan. Each country has its own style of neutrality because, first of all, of its geographical position. And we always, you know, underline this: Georgia is positioned at the crossroads of East and West, North and South.

Historically, it was an arena of conflicting interests among major regional countries and superpowers. But now the geopolitical situation has changed, and my colleagues and I believe that Georgia can become a place of cooperation, first of all through business and economic projects, like this Middle Corridor, which is already operating. And by the way, it is now the only route—the main route from the East to Europe. We hope that Georgia can play this role better as a neutral country, developing as a peaceful, stable, neutral country. And this will be in the interests not only of Georgia, but also of our neighbors, the wider region, and, of course, the leading countries. That is my answer in brief.

#Moderator

Sure. And as they're telling me, we have a question from the audience specifically for you, Mr. Cardin. Georgi Guruli is asking: In your opinion, Mr. Cardin, what impact would the end of the war in Ukraine, under the current circumstances or even a worse scenario, have on Georgia? And should Ukraine's experience serve as a lesson for Georgia? Yeah.

#Speaker 1

Well, to the second part of that question, that's an obvious yes. Georgia should absolutely learn the lessons of the war in Ukraine, which was an unnecessary war brought on by the American elites and the bad advice American elites were giving Ukraine. In the run-up to the war—people forget this—in November of 2021, the foreign minister of Ukraine and the Secretary of State of the United States signed a strategic charter agreement. A month later, Russia issued a draft peace treaty, which was immediately rejected by Washington and Brussels.

The Russians said, "No NATO expansion. Choose neutrality." The American elites basically laughed at it. And then what happened two months later? The tragedy of that war began. So there are a lot of lessons to be learned from the war in Ukraine, and I think that is principal among them. In terms of the effect that the end of the war will have on Georgia, well, look, Russia is going to win the war. Ukraine is going to be a basket case, a kind of black hole in the middle of Europe, a Kosovo on steroids. Its economy is destroyed. They've lost a generation of young men.

The millions and millions of people who have fled are not coming back. It's going to end up as a rump state. It's not going to get the territories back in the Donbas. It's over. And that's a grim lesson. And I know that American elites are not going to learn the lesson because we never do. We didn't learn the lesson of Korea. We didn't learn the lessons of Vietnam. We didn't learn the lessons of Iraq or Afghanistan or Libya or Syria. We're not going to learn the lessons. It's important for Georgians to safeguard their future and the future of their children by learning that very painful lesson that was taught to Ukraine.

#Moderator

Thank you for the response. I want to encourage members of the audience to send questions using the QR code on the screen. The famous Georgian diplomat and former foreign minister Alexander Chikvaidze famously said that a small country doesn't have the luxury of making big mistakes. So I would like to ask all of you to evaluate Georgia's current foreign policy.

#Speaker 3

You know, by the way, I think I met Mr. Chikvaidze, Ambassador Chikvaidze. Was he also the ambassador to The Hague?

#Speaker 1

Yes, at one time. Okay.

#Speaker 3

It was at the end of 1980, probably. I was in The Hague, and I met him there. Now...

#Speaker 3

Yes, one thing that probably hasn't changed, as the case of Ukraine shows, is that even in the 21st century, territories can be changed and lost through the use of force. It is unfortunate, but I believe there is nothing to be done about it in that case, because the war ends with territorial changes, territorial concessions by Ukraine. I have thought about Georgia's lost territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Of course, you know, these lost territories are sometimes like toothpaste. It is quite easy to squeeze it out of the tube, but it is very difficult to put it back into the tube.

But the comparison with toothpaste is not quite applicable to these lost territories. I believe there is hope that good, long-term relations between Georgia and Russia will lead to a situation in which Russia will not oppose the reunification of these territories with Georgia. I don't know how long it will

take, but from my point of view, it may be possible. It is not an immediate opportunity, of course, but the comparison with toothpaste probably does not apply in this case. In most cases, it does, in my opinion. Sure.

#Moderator

Mr. Johnson, please.

#Larry Johnson

I want to return to...

#Larry Johnson

There, it works. I want to return to what Jim said at the outset about Professor Morandi, and this highlights a problem for Georgia. Why in the world would Georgia submit itself to sanctions the United States wants to levy against Iran when it is the United States that unjustly, illegally attacked Iran? Why are you submitting to this? You should tell the United States to screw off. How dare they? You have no right to dictate to us, a sovereign nation, who we will and will not allow into our country when you are, in fact, the ones who attacked a country that had not attacked you—a country that was involved in negotiations. I mean, really, think about it. It's outrageous. And Georgia just sort of bent over and went along with it. So, yeah, let me say, you know, here I am in America, and I can't sit here and criticize you, but really, shame on Georgia for going along with that.

#Moderator

Sure. Mr. Ambassador, is there anything you'd like to add, sir?

#Speaker 2

Yes, I don't want to go into the facts in depth, but as a strong believer in realpolitik and a strong follower of it, I think that our government, which talks quite a lot about realpolitik and does quite a lot of things in accordance with it, sometimes does not fully follow its rules. I would like our government to follow realpolitik much more closely in the future. This is what I want as a Georgian and as a Georgian diplomat.

#Moderator

You're preaching to the choir, sir, Mr. Carden.

#Speaker 1

Sure. So, with regard to Georgian foreign policy, one of the issues that I feel should be raised is that I've read that negotiations with the EU are stalled at the moment. But I've read elsewhere that there's a goal that's been set for 2030. All right. So, picking up on where I left off with regard to the lessons from Ukraine, you know, joining the EU is not going to be seen as a benign move, I think, in Moscow.

Now, I know that there's been a lot of talk with regard to Moscow being okay with, you know, Ukraine eventually joining the EU, but they know very well that there's no appetite in Europe for bringing the Ukrainians into the EU. So they lose nothing by saying they're fine with that. But, you know, if you get an EU association agreement, it's going to have parts of it that require military interoperability, which is code for NATO. And that's going to be a problem. So that's something that should be kept in mind and probably would need to be addressed. I personally think that the Russians are correct when they see the EU as kind of a NATO stalking horse.

#Moderator

Sure. We have another question from the audience for you, Mr. Johnson. Lela Kekalia is asking this question: Recently, Russia has taken off the gloves, so to speak, and significantly intensified its offensive. How long should this war go on—to the last Ukrainian? Or will the forces behind this war, which we call the deep state, go even further? So what do you expect?

#Larry Johnson

I think it'll be over by April 7th. And the reason I say that is, when Trump and Putin agreed on the diesel deal and the United States said that they would lift the sanctions until April 7th, I wondered where that date came from. So this is speculation on my part, but I believe that President Putin may have told Trump, "We should have this wrapped up by the spring."

#Speaker 3

So they could say, "Okay, April 7th."

#Larry Johnson

Clearly, the Russians have moved beyond the realm of a special military operation. They are conducting a full-scale war now. And that involves, let's call it, the economic strangulation of Ukraine by shutting down the Black Sea ports, attacks on the energy infrastructure across Ukraine, ground operations being conducted all along the line of contact, and intense missile and drone barrages directed primarily at Kyiv, but also at other spots throughout Ukraine. And Putin made it very clear in

his last meeting with General Gerasimov and the general staff of the Russian army that he wants this wrapped up now, sooner rather than later. And so I don't think the Russians are seeking to string this out. But I do believe, you know, the West has drawn the wrong conclusion.

They've tried to say, "Oh, see, this is how weak Russia is, because it's taken them four and a half years." Well, they made a decision at the outset that they weren't going to wantonly kill civilians. And that was one of the points I made in my recent testimony before the UN Security Council. When you look at the volume of missiles, drones, bombs, and other weaponry used in Ukraine, and the explosions that have taken place, and compare that to what happened during the Great Patriotic War, World War II, there have been remarkably few civilian casualties relative to the volume of weaponry used. But nonetheless, Russia continues with that plan to limit civilian casualties. But I think Ukraine is reaching its limits.

#Moderator

Thank you for your response, sir. Sure.

#Speaker 3

I think when Russia invaded Ukraine, Russia called it a special military operation. And of course, it still is called that in Russia. All Russian officials call it a special military operation. But in the West, the term is "unprovoked and full-scale." And it reminds me of the Soviet period, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. The term used was "limited Soviet contingent of troops in Afghanistan"—limited. And I was going to publish an article, probably in 1989, in one of the journals in Russia, and I called it "War in Afghanistan," about Soviet troops in Afghanistan. The editor-in-chief told me, "No, no, write that this is a limited Soviet contingent of troops." So there's a kind of Sovietization going on in the West. The West is also using Soviet-style methods and narratives: "full-scale invasion." It was not a full-scale invasion. It was a very limited invasion in 2022.

#Speaker 3

What is going on now is already a full-scale war. Until recently, Russia was fighting with one hand tied behind its back, for various reasons. And now there is no limit. I don't know whether it will be the 7th of April or maybe later, but I believe Russia is going to finish the war next year. I am pretty sure. I may be wrong, but that is hardly possible.

#Moderator

Sure. Respected gentlemen, we're running out of time, so I'd like to ask if you have any closing remarks, starting with you, Mr. Cardin, sir.

#Speaker 1

Yeah. So this is my second time in this really, really fine city, and this morning I was walking around the Old Town district. By the synagogue, there was some graffiti on the wall, and it said, "1941–1945, no more." And I thought, that's a pretty good place to start. That is really the responsibility of our politicians, our leaders, and all of us: to make sure nothing like that ever happens again. And I think that founding a party based on the principle of neutrality is really a good place to start. And I wish you the best of luck.

#Moderator

Is there anything you'd like to add at the end?

#Speaker 2

Only two words. I hope my colleagues were speaking about a ceasefire and not about ending the war, because I think it will be one more frozen conflict for a long time. Ukrainians will never agree that these territories conquered by Russia are not their territories, and Russia will never give these territories back. That's what I mean by one more frozen conflict. As for a ceasefire, yes, of course, it's possible.

#Moderator

Is there anything you would add, Mr. Johnson, as a closing note? Sure. I think that's it, then.