Military Ambitions of US Ambassador to Georgia, Kelly Degnan

In January, Kelly C. Degnan, the new US Ambassador to Georgia, arrived in Tbilisi. In fact, the top position at the US Embassy in Georgia had remained vacant for a relatively long period. At the time of her appointment for the role, she had been consistently described as a career diplomat at the White House. At the same time, Washington also highlighted the fact that during her 25-year career, a significant portion of Kelly Degnan’s work had been tied to military institutions of the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Before her arrival in Georgia, she was the Political Advisor to the Commander of United States Naval Forces Europe – the United States Naval Forces Africa. Previously, Kelly Degnan had served as Political Counselor at the United States Mission to NATO in Brussels (Belgium), and as Senior Civilian Representative to Brigade Combat Team Salerno in Khost (Afghanistan). As an expert on NATO policies and the organization’s expansion eastwards, she shared her opinion, on more than one occasion, about NATO’s strategic concept of “dynamic engagement” in relation to benefits Europe would derive from the enlargement of the North Atlantic Alliance, and about the role “soft power” would play in the new strategic concept of NATO and its future initiatives. Kelly Degnan also openly talked about her experience in Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as the role of US mission to NATO and its tasks, such as gathering, analyzing and processing information.

It is important to add that the candidate for the position of US Ambassador to Georgia was not chosen at random, instead the decision was made taking into account the newly updated US policy towards the entire region of Transcaucasia. It is common knowledge that, earlier on, the US Department of State had tried to push through Bridget Brink’s nomination for the aforementioned role. She had the reputation of one of the most knowledgeable experts on the region. Bridget Brink served as Political-Economic Chief (from 2005 to 2008), and as Deputy Chief of Mission (from 2011 to 2014) at the US Embassy in Tbilisi. Starting in 2015, she became the Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs (a part of US Department of State). At the time, Bridget Brink was well informed about internal upheavals that had recently occurred in Georgia. She was equally known for predisposition towards Mikheil Saakashvili and his party.

However, due to Washington’s policy shift towards Georgia, which stemmed from Tbilisi’s express intention to join the European Union and NATO as well as the signing of U.S.-Georgia Security Cooperation Framework in November 2019, the decision was made to choose Kelly Degnan for the post. After all, a military uniform suits this wiry lady far better than an outfit of a diplomat, and besides, having her in the role of Ambassador is more beneficial to strengthening US military presence, and to also try and speed up the construction of a port in Anaklia, where the US intends to establish a naval base. In addition, on account of the signing of the bilateral agreement on security cooperation, Kelly Degnan became responsible for implementing Pentagon’s plans to create Cooperative Security Locations (CSLs) in Georgia, i.e. facilities “with little or no permanent US personnel presence, which may contain pre-positioned equipment”. Engaging in military cooperation in this manner without attracting unnecessary attention to the establishment of de-facto US military bases in Georgia, would allow the United States to increase its military presence in another nation, and, if necessary, to quickly deploy US army’s assault and logistics support units in any region. Furthermore, Kelly Degnan has been tasked with focusing on Georgia’s 2020 parliamentary election, which will become, as US experts hope, a defining pivotal moment for the nation.

Soon after the new US Ambassador to Georgia arrived in Tbilisi, the construction of a new building for the Command and Staff Training Center (CSTC) in Krtsanisi, a military training facility located outside Georgia’s capital, began. In
April, during an interview with the Georgian Public Broadcasting radio channel in April, NATO Secretory General’s Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia James Appathurai talked about providing more NATO “support for Georgia as a response to security challenges in the Black Sea region” and “prospects of an increased participation of Georgia in NATO ‘hybrid defense’ doctrine”.

In an interview with Radio Liberty at the beginning of March, US Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan talked about USA’s steadfast commitment to Georgia’s membership in NATO. She said that Georgia would surely become a NATO member, which meant that the nation would “have to do the hard work” required to meet North Atlantic Alliance’s standards. Retired Georgian general Guram Nikolashvili told Georgia’s media outlet Georgia and World that his nation had spent enormous sums of money on NATO operations, and lacked money for its own armed forces. He said that for Georgia to meet NATO standards, the country essentially needed to send ever increasing numbers of troops to take part in international operations of the North Atlantic Alliance. Such participation has required enormous expenditures that have crippled the nation’s defense budget. According to Guram Nikolashvili, involvement in the aforementioned missions cost up to 200 million Georgian Lari a year (i.e. approximately $65 million), and starting with the intervention in Iraq until the present day, Georgia has already spent more than GEL 4 billion (or $1.3 billion).

It is therefore not surprising, according to an interview of professor Valeri Kvaratskhelia by news source Georgia and World in February, that 80% of Georgia’s population is “allergic” to the cursed alliance, NATO. The Doctor of Philosophy said the US hoped to ensure that whoever had the reins of power in Georgia would be willing to respond to Russia with force, if necessary, or at the very least, to use warmongering rhetoric. In fact, Valeri Kvaratskhelia believed that Washington needed Georgia to become its second Ukraine. According to the professor, the United States was not Georgia’s partner or friend, but instead a boss shaking its finer at Tbilisi while giving it orders.

NATO, however, is not the only source of discontent in Georgia as of recent. Purportedly, Georgia’s leaders have, on numerous occasions, expressed their disapproval of activities carried out by US-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) in their country. Surveys conducted by this non-profit, non-partisan organization have reportedly yielded inaccurate results and appeared to be biased towards the opposition.

In such a climate, Ambassador Kelly Degnan appears to have taken the reins of control over Georgia’s domestic political movements firmly in her “iron hands” in order to have more sway over anti-American forces within this nation. Gubaz Sanikidze, a former lawmaker in Parliament of Georgia and a member of Democratic Movement – United Georgia, stated that telephone conversations between former Prime Minister and Chairman of Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia party Bidzina Ivanishvili were being monitored by the US Embassy in Georgia.

Having baselessly accused Russia of intending to interfere in upcoming Georgian parliamentary elections in October 2020, US Ambassador Kelly Degnan, who herself is openly involved in internal affairs of this nation, met with “leaders of Georgian opposition parties on February 18 to help resolve a long-running political crisis”. On March 8, the ruling and opposition parties reached a deal that brought “Georgia’s electoral system substantially closer to the promised land of proportional representation”. The changes will, therefore, have an impact on Georgia’s upcoming parliamentary election this autumn.

Nowadays, it is not at all hard to believe that the United States is actively seeking to increase its influence in Georgia, just as it did in Ukraine. In the current climate, it is easy to empathize with the Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia party. After all, the United States seemingly forced it to reach a compromise with the opposition parties by meeting with leaders of the latter at the US Embassy. Nowadays, in order to make an accurate assessment of Georgia’s true policies, one needs to first admit that it is an “occupied nation”, and to understand what role “US military consul” Kelly Degnan actually plays in this country.

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