BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

Vol. 4 | No. 1 | Fall 2020

Silk Road Region as Global Keystone? Geopolitics & Connectivity in the Heart of the World

Taking Stock of Regional Quandaries

Profile in Leadership

Baku Dialogues Interview

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Editorial Statement

The first issue of *Baku Dialogues* was released in Fall 2014 and was published semi-regularly in the years that followed. The present issue, published in Fall 2020, marks the re-launch of *Baku Dialogues*, ADA University's flagship English-language quarterly journal. Henceforth, the publication's subtitle is *Policy Perspectives on the Silk Road Region*.

This choice reflects a triple intention. First, to cover broadly topics of geopolitical relevance to the overlapping set of regions to which Azerbaijan and its neighbors belong. We thus define the Silk Road region loosely as the geographic space looking west past Anatolia to the warm seas beyond; north across the Caspian towards the Great Plain and the Great Steppe; east to the peaks of the Altai and the arid sands of the Taklamakan; and south towards the Hindu Kush and the Indus valley, looping down around in the direction of the Persian Gulf and across the Fertile Crescent.

Second, to focus on contemporary cross-cutting issues that impact on the international position of what we view as one of the few keystone regions of global affairs, ranging from energy politics and infrastructure security to economic development and cultural heritage.

Third, the choice of subtitle is indicative of our deep-seated conviction that the comprehensive rejuvenation of a vast region that stood for centuries at the fulcrum of trade, innovation, and refinement requires both a healthy respect of frontiers as sovereign markers of territorial integrity and a farsighted predisposition to ensure the region can continue to grow as a strategic center of attraction for capital, goods, talent, and technologies.

The editorial premise of *Baku Dialogues* is that the Silk Road region is and will remain an important seam of international relations, continuing to serve as (i) a significant political and economic crossroads between various geographies; (ii) an important intercessor between major powers; and (iii) an unavoidable gateway between different blocks of states, regional associations, and civilizational groupings.

The intended audience of *Baku Dialogues* is diverse: national, regional, and international policymakers, diplomats, officials, legislators, commentators, thought leaders, journalists, business executives, think-tankers, academics, scholars, and students—all those who in one way or another pay attention to issues of consequence affecting the trajectory of this part of the world.

As has been the case throughout its publication history, *Baku Dialogues* is and will remain an independent policy journal. The content of each issue of the journal (e.g. essays, interviews, profiles, etc.) thus does not represent any institutional viewpoint. The analyses provided and viewpoints expressed by the authors featured in *Baku Dialogues* do not necessarily reflect those of its publisher, editors, consultants, Editorial Advisory Council members, and anyone else affiliated with ADA University or *Baku Dialogues*. Our sole acceptance of responsibility is the provision of a forum dedicated to intellectual discussion and debate.

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Azerbaijan's New Geopolitics

Svante Cornell

Azerbaijan's geopolitics have changed considerably in the last decade, along with the growing general instability in its neighborhood. Gone are the days symbolized by the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline's construction, when a relatively stable balance existed between a loose Russian-led alignment including Iran and Armenia, and an informal entente between the United States and Turkey, which supported the independence of Azerbaijan and Georgia and the construction of direct energy transportation routes to Europe.

From 2008 until today, the geopolitical environment has shifted in several important ways. First, it is more unstable and unpredictable. Second, the threshold of the use of force has decreased dramatically. And third, to a significant extent, the geopolitics of Eurasia and the Middle East have merged, bringing increasing complications.

Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy Priorities

Azerbaijan's foreign policy is determined by a set of priorities that have remained essentially unchanged since the mid-1990s. First and foremost among these is the strengthening and consolidation of the independence and sovereignty of the country. Independence is something that many states can take for granted; but this is not the case in the South Caucasus.

Many Azerbaijanis are well aware that the country's first attempt at independence in 1918 was ended by a Soviet invasion two years later. After independence was restored in 1991, Azerbaijan has similarly had to confront a reality in which outside powers cannot be trusted to respect the country' sovereignty. Moscow, of course, makes no secret of its claim to a "sphere of privileged interests" in the former Soviet Union "but not only," to use former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev's 2008 formulation. Iran, with a large ethnic Azerbaijani population and a theocratic form of government, has also shown hostility to Azerbaijan: high-ranking Iranian figures have speculated loudly on the necessity of Azerbaijan to "return" to the Iranian realm. Even Turkey, Azerbaijan's closest ally, has occasionally exhibited behavior akin to that of a domineering big brother. And Western states, with which Azerbaijan sought to build close relations, have not shied from interfering in the country's internal affairs to promote their preferred political priorities.

Azerbaijan has embarked on a foreign policy that seeks to maintain functioning relations with all neighbors and avoid making itself dependent on any particular power for its security.

This is a geopolitical reality Azerbaijan shares with two of its immediate neighbors, Armenia and Georgia. But those states are both considerably weaker than Azerbaijan and have essentially accepted the need to rely on a particular external force for their respective security. Armenia, in order to safeguard the conquest of Nagorno-Karabakh and adjoining territories, mortgaged its independence to Russia in exchange for military and political support. Georgia, seeing Russia as the main threat to its independence, has appealed for Western support.

While Azerbaijan largely shares Tbilisi's analysis of the regional situation, it has embarked on a foreign policy that seeks to maintain functioning relations with all neighbors and avoid making itself dependent on any particular power for its security. Azerbaijan has embarked on a foreign policy that seeks to maintain functioning relations with all neighbors and avoid making itself dependent on any particular power for its security. While this was a bold proposition for a relatively small country surrounded by large powers, it has been a successful policy for several reasons. First, Azerbaijan's oil and gas resources provided it with financial resources that allowed it to build security and military institutions as well as improve the living

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standards of its population. Second, Azerbaijan's society is considerably more cohesive than Georgia's. Put together, these have meant that foreign powers have fewer levers to use to destabilize the country internally. And third, the commitment by Azerbaijan's leadership to a stable and cautious foreign policy course translated these conditions into an actual viable strategy.

The second factor determining Azerbaijan's foreign policy has been the conflict with Armenia, and the latter's occupation of one-sixth of Azerbaijan's territory. The restoration of the country's territorial integrity is second only to the consolidation of its independence as a priority for the Baku government. This has led Azerbaijan to design a foreign policy geared toward this goal. It has made Azerbaijan relatively hostile to those countries that have supported Armenia, such as Russia and Iran, and positively predisposed to those that took Baku's side early on, such as Turkey, Israel, and Pakistan. But Azerbaijan has been forced to accept the continued dominant influence of Russia on the conflict, and thus to seek to reduce Russia's tendency to lean toward Armenia in the conflict. It has also led Azerbaijan to take on an active role in a number of multilateral organizations in order to cement broad international support for its territorial integrity. Most important, it has led Baku to pursue a robust defense posture, with the aim of building a military capable enough to force Armenia to make meaningful concessions in negotiations.

Changes in Geopolitics

For the two first decades of its independence, Azerbaijan was a key part of a relatively stable geopolitical environment, centered on the development of the east-west corridor connecting Europe with Central Asia. Put in a very simplified way, this period saw a geopolitical alignment uniting those forces that supported the development and expansion of the east-west corridor against those that opposed it. This corridor began with the development of Caspian oil and gas resources, and subsequently expanded to military transit for American and NATO operations in Afghanistan. More recently, it has developed into a civilian transportation corridor—a land bridge connecting Europe and Asia—in which the Port of Baku plays a key role as well.

The outside forces supporting the corridor were led by the United States and Turkey, whose policies at the time aligned closely and were coordinated, while European states played a secondary role. In Central Asia, China gradually emerged as a supporter of the corridor as well. Outside forces opposing the corridor were led first and foremost by Russia, which viewed the development of the corridor as a threat to its efforts to re-establish a sphere of influence among former Soviet states in what is now termed by some as the Silk Road region. Because it feared the corridor would lead to a surge of Western and Turkish influence in the region, Iran joined with Russia in opposition to its development.

Among regional states, Georgia and Azerbaijan were enthusiastic supporters and prime beneficiaries of the corridor. Only Armenia, which was left isolated as a result of its occupation of Azerbaijani territory, was solidly subsumed under the Russian-Iranian alignment. Central Asian dynamics were less clear: neutral Turkmenistan avoided most international entanglements, while Kazakhstan sought to walk a tightrope, being a key part of Russian-led cooperative institutions while simultaneously welcoming the corridor's development. East of the Caspian, only Uzbekistan was able to firmly stake out an independent and assertive position, but its relationship with the West suffered from controversy over its domestic policies.

This geopolitical balance was relatively stable until the mid-2000s. It came to be challenged by two developments: first, the renewed assertiveness of Russia under Vladimir Putin; and second, the growing injection by the United States of normative concerns in its foreign policy toward the region.

The rise of Putin, and his growing aggressiveness toward regional states, raised the cost of embracing a pro-Western foreign policy. It also increased the downside of engaging in an opening of the political system, with Russian subversive activities increasing in scope and intensity—as the United States would itself discover, Moscow developed skill at exploiting the vulnerabilities of open societies. Meanwhile, President George W. Bush's "Freedom Agenda" came to differentiate among regional states on the basis of their domestic political system: focusing particular support on those countries that experienced "color revolutions" while adopting an increasingly frosty stance toward countries that did not engage in significant political reform.

The 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia effectively brought an end to the stability of regional geopolitics. This effectively undermined the logic of the east-west corridor, as it led the United States to neglect its ties with geopolitically crucial countries like Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, and in fact contributed to driving a wedge between

Azerbaijan and Georgia, contrary to earlier efforts to support the budding strategic partnership between these states.

It indicated that the threshold for the use of massive force against a sovereign state had been dramatically lowered in the region; but also indicated that the willingness of outside powers to step in to support the east-west corridor when push came to shove was relatively limited. More importantly, it indicated that Western states either saw the corridor as a feat that had already been accomplished, or one in which they were not willing to invest considerable resources.

For states in Central Asia and the Caucasus, these developments indicated that outside (read: Western) backing for their sovereignty and territorial integrity would be limited to diplomatic support and economic aid; and that such support may not be sufficient to counter an armed challenge from either Russia or Iran. Western security guarantees came to be seen as the opposite of robust, to put it euphemistically. Granted, the Russian invasion of Georgia failed to result in the ouster of the Saakashvili government; but the message had been heard loud and clear across the region: cross Russia at your own peril. Only two years later, this message was reiterated in Kyrgyzstan, as Moscow endorsed the ouster of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev after his government had failed to deliver on a promise to Moscow to remove America's military base in the country. BD

The 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia effectively brought an end to the stability of regional geopolitics.

This new reality forced regional states to reconsider their foreign policy approaches. It led several states, Azerbaijan prominently among them, to turn away from an overtly pro-Western stance toward a policy of non-alignment. This implied that the country would not seek membership in Western institutions like NATO and the EU, while it would simultaneously reject membership in Russian-led institutions like the emerging Eurasian Economic Union. In Central Asia, Uzbekistan adopted a similar approach, as did Tajikistan. Moreover, it led regional states to focus on strengthening their state institutions—not least in the security sector—in order to be able to withstand, on their own, outside powers' "hybrid warfare" designed to undermine and compromise their statehood.

Gradually, in Central Asia, the new geopolitical environment led to a newfound urge among leaders in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, primarily, to develop mechanisms of regional coordination and cooperation to prevent foreign powers from engaging in "divide and rule" policies in the region. In the South Caucasus, by contrast, the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict made such regional cooperation impossible, and thus reinforced Moscow's intent to manipulate the conflict to prevent regional states from coming together.

From Eurasia to the Middle East?

A further development over the past decade has been the gradual merger of the geopolitics of the South Caucasus and the Middle East. In a sense, the South Caucasus has historically been connected to the Middle East, and from a long-term perspective, its integration into the Russian empire from 1828 to 1991 could be considered a historical anomaly. Still, in the first two decades of independence, Middle Eastern dynamics had only a minor influence on the region; it was connected much more closely with the dynamics of Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region.

This changed gradually as Soviet-era psychological boundaries began to fade and regional dynamics began to intertwine. The decisive moment was the 2011 Arab upheavals. As several Middle Eastern states descended into civil strife, the regional powers that surrounded the South Caucasus emerged as key players in these conflicts as well. While Iran had always been closely focused on Middle Eastern affairs, the growing involvement of both Turkey and Russia in the geopolitics of the Middle East were key factors in the process that connected the South Caucasus to that region.

In this perspective, Turkey's transformation is of utmost importance. In the several decades after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of Turkey as a nation-state, the country had, for most practical purposes, acted as part of "the West" and both turned its back from and sought to stay out of Middle Eastern entanglements. Moreover, its policies were closely aligned with those of the United States and Europe. This gradually began to change as the Cold War was coming to an end and was accelerated with Recep Tayyip Erdogan's arrival on the political scene. From then on, Turkey pursued increasingly unilateral policies designed to establish itself as a "manager of change" in

the region, to quote then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu.

In practice, this policy sought to bring the Muslim Brotherhood to power across the region, particularly in Syria and Egypt. Turkey intervened in the Syrian civil war, agitated for the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and then emerged as the major backer of the short-lived Muslim Brotherhood regime led by Mohammed Morsi. More recently, Turkey has involved itself in the civil war in Libya, as the main external backer of the Tripoli government led by Fayaz al-Sarraj, providing weapons as well as fighters to back up that government.

Russia's return to Middle East politics has been equally dramatic. The Kremlin identified a vacuum in 2013, when U.S. President Barack Obama reneged on his stated "red line," which implied that America would intervene against Syria's president Bashar al-Assad should his regime use chemical weapons. Moscow initially took the lead in removing most chemical weapons from Syria, thus establishing itself as a key arbiter of the conflict. Subsequently, Moscow agreed with Tehran on a joint effort to prop up the Assad regime, and inserted its military forces into Syria in 2015. This brought Moscow and Tehran in confrontation with Ankara, which backed the opposition to Assad.

As a result, Turkey shot down a Russian jet over the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2015, leading to a rapid deterioration of the previously relatively friendly relations between the two powers. Aggressive Russian actions against Turkey, including substantial sanctions, a tourism embargo, and covert actions led to considerable consequences for Turkey, not least in the economic realm. By the summer of 2016, Turkey was forced to apologize for the incident, in an effort to normalize relations. Following the failed July 2016 coup against Erdogan, Turkish-Russian relations again improved rapidly, not least because Ankara blamed the United States for involvement in the coup. But by 2018-2019, the relationship soured again, as Ankara and Moscow were unable to agree on a common approach in Syria; meanwhile, they found themselves on opposing sides of the civil war in Libya, given Russian support for the Benghazi-based government and the Libyan National Army.

This volatile situation had implications for the South Caucasus. Only days after Turkey accused Russia of violating its airspace while conducting raids in northern Syria in October 2015, Armenian authorities accused Turkey of sending military helicopters into Armenian airspace. After Turkey shot down the Russian jet, Russia responded by deploying military helicopters to the Erebuni base near Yerevan. During the fall of 2015, Moscow also made a demonstration of strength by using warships in the Caspian sea to fire missiles at targets in Syria. There was no clear military rationale for using ships to fire these missiles; the move was interpreted instead mainly as a sign of Russia's military capabilities. It also served as a key reminder of the connection between the South Caucasus and Middle Eastern "theaters" of operation.

Other elements than these great power politics connect the Caucasus with the Middle East. The rising level of Middle Eastern tourism to Azerbaijan and Georgia is a small but culturally significant example of this. A factor that is more important from a political perspective has been jihadist recruitment to the conflicts in the Levant. This phenomenon, which has also affected Central Asia to a considerable degree, has shown how conflicts in the Middle East, coupled with the region's ideological currents, can have an impact on populations elsewhere. In recent years, it has affected Azerbaijan, Georgia, and the North Caucasus, all of which have been sources of fighters, posing challenges for governments concerned with the activities of these radicalized individuals as they return to their home countries.

> *Nearing the beginning of the fourth decade of its independence, Azerbaijan is more closely connected to Middle Eastern dynamics than it has been in two centuries.*

Azerbaijan is particularly vulnerable to developments in the Middle East, as the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen have featured a strong element of sectarian violence pitting Sunni and Shia groups against each other. Whether these sectarian conflicts are the result of genuine communal tensions or have been manufactured by outside powers is beside the point: as in the Western Balkans of the 1990s, it is clear that once established, such sectarian tensions pose considerable danger of spreading. As a country that is majority Shia with a large Sunni minority, Azerbaijan's very social stability is connected to the conflicts in the Middle East. While there has thus far been little evidence

of the spread of sectarian enmity to Azerbaijan, the situation in the Middle East has led the Azerbaijani government to strengthen its commitment to the secularism of the state, which the leadership understands to be the sole guarantor of inter-communal harmony.

In sum, nearing the beginning of the fourth decade of its independence, Azerbaijan is more closely connected to Middle Eastern dynamics than it has been in two centuries. This process, moreover, is likely to continue to bring Azerbaijan in ever greater proximity to dynamics of the Middle East. This, in turn, requires Baku to spend greater energy in understanding the rapidly developing logic of the region's geopolitics.

Middle East Dynamics

The geopolitics of the Near East have changed fundamentally in recent decades. Today, the region is not defined primarily by the Arab-Israeli conflict, or even an Arab-Iranian rivalry. Instead, a trilateral rivalry has emerged for domination of the Near East, pitting three factions against one another: an Iranian faction, a conservative Sunni group led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and a radical Sunni group led by Turkey and Qatar. This novel situation is the result of an important shift represented first and foremost by a transformed Turkey's bid to take a leading role in Near East politics, but also by the declining abilities of formerly leading Arab powers like Egypt, Iraq, and Syria.

The three groupings that have emerged are each led by a regional player contending for power and influence. All three exhibit considerable ambition; but all three also face grave internal challenges, which only raise the region's geopolitical stakes.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE lead a first group, consisting mainly of conservative Arab monarchies. This group views with considerable alarm both Iran's regional ambitions and the Islamist populism represented by Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are supported, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, by Egypt, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Jordan. Israel also forms a de facto part of this alignment, though Israel does so as an independent outsider, rather than as a full part of the alignment.

Saudi-Iranian animosity has been present for decades. Still, during the presidencies of Mohammad Khatami and Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, they were not directly hostile. The rivalry acquired new momentum after the American invasion of Iraq, and particularly after the Obama administration's nuclear deal with Iran, which was followed by the rising power of two Crown Princes, Mohammed bin Zayed of Abu Dhabi and Mohammed bin Sultan of Saudi Arabia.

Both can be termed authoritarian modernizers: the UAE has developed much farther on the course of modernization and is an incomparably more liberal a society than Saudi Arabia. Mohammed bin Sultan, of course, has shown numerous instances of rashness and bad judgment, most infamously in the killing of dissident writer Jamal Khashoggi that took place in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. But he has done what no one else has done in Saudi Arabia: push back against the Salafi-Wahhabi clergy as well as against the more conservative elements of the House of Saud that had dominated the country since the 1979 siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Indeed, the social freedoms that have been introduced in the kingdom could scarcely have been imagined five years ago.

Events in recent years have confirmed that Riyadh's main aim is the preservation of the regime. Whereas earlier leaders saw the promotion of Salafi ideology as an instrument toward this goal, the fact that Salafi-jihadi extremists have targeted the kingdom itself has led a new generation of leaders to conclude the opposite. In this process of reform, Saudi Arabia has become socially much more liberal yet politically more authoritarian.

Iran dominates a second faction seeking domination in the Near East, and is assertively trying to build what has come to be termed the Shia crescent. Tehran benefited considerably from America's troubles in Iraq, and particularly from the Obama administration's decision to effectively withdraw its presence from the country. With the growth of sectarian tensions across the Near East in the past decade, Tehran capitalized on the fear of the Salafi-jihadi extremists among the Shia as well as other non-Sunni groups across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.

This process began in Lebanon over a decade ago, as Iran succeeded in installing Hezbollah as the most powerful force in Lebanese society and subsequently also in the Lebanese state. Tehran then abetted the sectarian violence in Iraq, making itself the benefactor and protector of Shia political groups and armed militias in that country. That, in turn, has provided Tehran with the ability to operate covertly in Iraq and to use Iraqi Shia militias for its larger foreign policy goals.

In Syria, Iran proved the decisive force in ensuring the survival of the Assad regime. It has utilized this

dependency to seek to install itself in southern Syria, forcing Israeli military intervention to prevent an Iranian presence directly on its border. In Yemen, Iran exercises considerably influence on the Houthi militias, who in turn have adopted the rhetoric and ideology of the Iranian regime, despite coming—like Syria's Alawites—from a very different branch of Shia Islam than the Iranian Jafari tradition.

On this basis, Tehran has succeeded in building a sphere of influence that is truly transnational: it ignores national boundaries and involves the undeclared deployment of Iranian troops and/or Iranian-controlled proxies in conflict zones in all these countries. This, along with Tehran's quest for nuclear weapons, has caused considerable alarm across the conservative Sunni bloc, as it has in the United States.

Turkey leads a third grouping that wants to dominate the region, and it is Ankara's return to the Near East that has played the greatest, but seldom acknowledged, role in reshaping the geopolitics of the Near East. Whereas Turkey was previously not a key factor in regional affairs, Ankara made a bid for leadership in the Near East in which its key partner has been Qatar. As mentioned, the pair sought to install a Muslim Brotherhood regime in Egypt, and Ankara similarly meddled in the domestic affairs of Syria, Libya, Tunisia, and Morocco, where it worked to shore up or install friendly political forces. This included supporting Sunni militant groups in Syria to topple the Assad regime, thereby bringing Turkey in conflict with Iran, which worked assertively to secure the regime's survival.

Ankara's gambit, however bold, has not been successful. The conservative Sunni bloc succeeded in its efforts to ensure the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, while Iran and Russia forced Turkey to retreat in its ambitions in Syria, narrowing them to restraining Kurdish political aspirations there.

But these setbacks have not reduced Ankara's long-term ambitions. Turkey has developed a military presence abroad for the first time since Ottoman days, with Qatar, again, serving as a key ally—and Ankara arguably played a key role in halting the Saudi-led effort to seek regime change in Doha in 2017. But Ankara also has established a military presence in Somalia, and sought to develop one on Sudan's Suakin island, directly opposite Jeddah on the Red Sea. Most recently, Ankara has upped the ante in Libya, sending Syrian extremist fighters and Turkish regular troops as well as arms to shore up the Tripoli-based government against the forces of the Libyan National Army endorsed by Abu Dhabi and Cairo, as well as Moscow and Paris.

All three of the faction-leading major powers have considerable domestic challenges. Saudi Arabia's leadership faces a rapidly growing, pampered, and in many ways ultra-Orthodox population, not to mention a restive and suppressed Shia minority. The success of the modernization process is by no means assured, and the country' transition to an economy that is not dominated by oil is questionable at best. At stake is the survival of the country itself and the Saud dynasty. Iran also faces mounting domestic dissent. The Islamic Republic has largely exhausted itself in intellectual terms, its legitimacy among the population undermined by its economic failures and foreign adventurism, and its legitimacy particularly weak among the large ethnic minorities in the country, including tens of millions of ethnic-Azerbaijanis and Kurds concentrated in the country's northwest. Large-scale protests periodically force the regime to engage in brutal repression to maintain power. And in Turkey, Erdogan's efforts to introduce a new, Islamist-tinged presidential system is faltering in the midst of economic mismanagement and the remarkable resilience of Turkish society to his vision of a "New Turkey."

This means that the stability of the trilateral geopolitical rivalry is tenuous. Considerable domestic shocks in any one of these major players is bound to have serious repercussions and may even usher in a paradigm shift across the region. But it also means that the stakes for each of the three powers could not be higher; and their understanding of the cut-throat nature of regional politics is exemplified by the risks they have all been willing to take, and the sums they have been willing to invest, in conflict zones where their interests have clashed.

While the rivalry is trilateral, its intensity varies considerably. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is no doubt the most intense and deep-seated. But the intra-Sunni conflict is beginning to approach it in terms of intensity. As it has played out over Egypt and now in Libya, the stakes in the Turkish-Qatari rivalry with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi appears to rival those of the Saudi-Iranian confrontation. Ankara sought to maximize use of the Khashoggi affair to discredit the Saudi leadership; as was revealed in summer 2019, the Saudi leadership retaliated by a systematic plan to undermine

Erdogan's power in Turkey. The GCC monarchies—and particularly Abu Dhabi—view the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood across the region as a mortal threat. Their concerted assault on Qatar indicated the seriousness with which they viewed the matter. By comparison, the rivalry between Turkey and Iran appears ever-present but manageable, ebbing and flowing without ever reaching the boiling point.

Implications for Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan, happily, finds itself at the periphery of this trilateral rivalry. Still, it needs to navigate the stormy waters of the region cautiously, as it has important relationships with all three sides. With Iran, Azerbaijan shares a common majority religion as well as a long history. But Iran has also been a threat to Azerbaijan's independence and has developed close relations with Armenia that have effectively enabled the economic survival of the Armenian-occupied territories in Azerbaijan.

Because of Iran's proven ability to create internal turmoil in Azerbaijan through support for Islamist groups, Baku has sought to maintain a distance from Tehran while simultaneously seeking to build a functioning relationship—not least in the economic realm. While Azerbaijan does not side with Tehran, and never will, it is also cautious not to become a target of Iranian actions.

Turkey is another matter: Azerbaijan and Turkey share close linguistic, cultural, economic, and military ties. In fact, Turkey is Azerbaijan's sole solid backer among the great powers. This is something the Azerbaijani leadership acknowledges and values highly, particularly as it forms the sole counterweight to Russian and Iranian backing of Armenia. Yet Turkey's own ideological transformation has been a cause for concern in Azerbaijan. Erdogan's embrace of Islamism as a guideline in Turkish foreign policy has been met with skepticism in Baku, as has Ankara's enthusiasm for regime change in countries like Egypt. The increasing Islamization of Turkey, furthermore, is a poor fit with Azerbaijan's doubling down on secularism as state policy. Azerbaijan's ties with Israel were developed very much in conjunction with Turkey two decades ago; but Baku then found itself under fire from Ankara because of its close ties to the Jewish state. Significantly, Baku did not let such Turkish criticism affect its priorities.

Turkey is Azerbaijan's sole solid backer among the great powers.

Thankfully, in the past five years, Erdogan has begun to soften the country's Islamist leanings somewhat, and instead, Turkish nationalism has risen in importance as state ideology under Erdogan's coalition with the nationalist party. This may cause trouble for some of Turkey's neighbors but is a blessing for Azerbaijan: it means a stronger endorsement of Azerbaijan's position in the conflict with Armenia compared to Erdogan's earlier stance, which included opening for the possibility of a rapprochement with Yerevan. Ankara's strong response to the July 2020 skirmishes on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border is illustrative of Turkey's assertive support for Azerbaijan.

In the past decade, the geopolitical environment surrounding the South Caucasus has become more unpredictable.

By contrast, in ideological terms, Azerbaijan would seem to have most in common with the conservative Arab powers. Similar to them, Azerbaijan is pursuing a policy of authoritarian modernization; also like them, Azerbaijan's leadership is hostile toward the ideological zeal pursued either by the Iranian regime or, intermittently, by Ankara and Doha, while it has cordial relations with Israel. And like the Arab powers, Azerbaijan is interested in regional stability and the maintenance of the status quo, and sees the emergence of upheavals and internal conflicts not as an opportunity but as a significant threat to its own stability.

Azerbaijan's position at the geographic outskirts of the Middle East is a blessing in this regard, as it may help the country maintain cordial relations with the various protagonists in Middle Eastern affairs. Still, Azerbaijan must follow developments in the region more closely, as they risk having an impact on its own freedom of maneuver. The Turkish-Israeli relationship is a key example: the sudden downturn in Turkish-Israeli relations led Ankara to demand a shift in Azerbaijan's own approach to Israel. It is not difficult to imagine similar situations in the future, potentially as a result of new flare-ups between Turkey and Iran, or between Turkey and the Sunni powers.

Unenviable Environment

In the past decade, the geopolitical environment surrounding the South Caucasus has become more unpredictable. Regional powers and their proxies are more prone to use force than previously, and the unresolved conflicts of the region appear further from solution than ever. While the geopolitics of the region are increasingly connected to those of the Middle East, the region's own unresolved conflicts remain a key vulnerability that are available to outside powers seeking to maximize their influence. Chief among these is the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, which has been on a trajectory of escalation for the past decade, mirroring broader regional developments.

An increasingly unstable regional environment makes it that much harder for Baku to seek a negotiated solution to the conflict with Yerevan—not least because of what appears to be the growing acceptance of the use of force in regional affairs, and a concomitant decline of multilateral institutions tasked with conflict resolution. This in turn appears to fuel Armenia's increasingly bold approach to the conflict, which appears to include the rejection of agreed-upon principles of the negotiation process. This puts Azerbaijan in a very difficult conundrum. On the one hand, Azerbaijani leaders may conclude that the negotiation process is useless, leaving the use of force as the only option to restore its territorial integrity. As the events of July 2020 have shown, a considerable section of the Azerbaijani public appears to have concluded as much. Still, a large-scale escalation of the conflict is almost certain to bring the intervention of several regional powers, with highly unpredictable consequences that could threaten a larger conflagration and jeopardize the very sovereignty of the country.

In conclusion, the environment in which Azerbaijani leaders must design and execute a foreign policy strategy has become even less enviable. Over the past decade, the country's adoption of a policy of mixing assertiveness with caution—while increasing reliance on its own resources at the expense of entanglements with foreign powers—has served it well. The growing merger of Eurasian and Middle Eastern geopolitics has made Azerbaijan's position more challenging, and there is little hope that the environment will improve in the coming decade. For Azerbaijan, the key task in the coming years will be to build enough leverage over regional powers to ensure that they take the country's interests into consideration when designing responses to the crises that are sure to emerge. BD

Geopolitical Keystone

Azerbaijan and the Global Position of the Silk Road Region

Nikolas K. Gvosdev

Historian Peter Frankopan concludes his magisterial sweep of world history, entitled *The Silk Roads* (2015), by noting that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, "networks and connections are quietly being knitted together across the spine of Asia; or rather, they are being restored. The Silk Roads are rising again." The Caspian-Black Sea mega-region, to use the formulation of Amur Hajiyev, director of the Modern Turkey Study Center at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, serves as the buckle connecting these various belts together—linking the northern Middle East with Central Asia and Southeastern Europe. Former U.S. ambassador to Azerbaijan Matthew Bryza prefers the term "greater Caspian region," which he defines as "the area stretching from India to the Black and Mediterranean Seas with the Caspian Sea at the center."

A recent revival of the term "Silk Road region" is perhaps to be preferred. It is defined much in the same way as Bryza in terms of east-west boundaries, but adds, with purposeful imprecision, the Siberian steppe as a northern boundary, then sweeps down in a southerly direction towards the Persian Gulf and up and back westward across the Fertile Crescent and the Levant to the Mediterranean.

Whichever term is used, this strategic area interlinks not only the world's two most critically important regions (the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific basins), but also directly interconnects South Asia, the Middle East, and the Eurasian space with each other.

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The Silk Road region is emerging as the central east-west interchange between the European Union (population of 500 million with a $19.6 trillion gross domestic product) and China (1.4 billion people and a GDP of $22.5 trillion), with a north-south corridor connecting India (1.3 billion people with a $2.7 trillion GDP) with Russia (144 million people and a $1.7 trillion GDP) and Turkey (83 million and $770 billion GDP).

Arguably, the Silk Road region is emerging as the most critical keystone zone for international relations in the twenty-first century; and Azerbaijan, as the central axis of the area, is poised to assume a more important role in world affairs as a result.

In geostrategic terms, this region is the geopolitical hinge where the North Atlantic Treaty Organization meets the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and where the Belt and Road Initiative connects with the wider European neighborhood and the European Union itself. Arguably, the Silk Road region is emerging as the most critical keystone zone for international relations in the twenty-first century; and Azerbaijan, as the central axis of the area, is poised to assume a more important role in world affairs as a result.

Moreover, in conditions of "great power competition"—where the possibility exists that competition between major powers like China and the United States could tip over into confrontation—other interconnectors, such as the Arctic northern route or the "maritime roads" running through the Indo-Pacific basin—face the possibility of interruption or even interdiction. The challenge, therefore, is to keep the Silk Road region stable but also to keep open its interconnecting channels linking the most critical regions of the world. The countries of this region, if they embrace their position as a central keystone of international relations, can guarantee that their interchanges will remain open, even in the event that other east-west and north-south routes go down due to environmental issues or political and economic challenges.

The Silk Road region—with Azerbaijan at its geopolitical center—is located at the seams of the global system and is positioned to serve as a critical mediator between different major powers, acting as gateways between different blocs of states, regional associations, and civilizational groupings. In turn, the

security and prosperity of almost all countries is now dependent on a series of transnational economic, security, and political networks that transfer capital, information, goods, and services across borders.

As deputy prime minister of Azerbaijan Shahin Mustafayev has noted, this region "has a unique geographical location, and many transportation corridors span our country. In addition to the East-West Trans-Caspian Corridor, North-South, South-West and North-West international transportation corridors pass through Azerbaijan." Safeguarding these interconnections ought to be the top priority for Azerbaijan's foreign policy. By acting as the keystone state of a keystone region of the world, Azerbaijan secures its position as one of the world's influential "middle powers" (in the words of Esmira Jafarova of the Baku-based AIR Center)—and can act as the gatekeeper and guarantor of one of the world economic system's principal passageways.

Keystone Region

While the Silk Roads running across Eurasia were a defining feature of antiquity, for much of the twentieth century the focus was on disconnection and disassociation. Following the collapse of the Tsarist empire, the newly-independent states of the Caucasus only had a brief period to try and secure their position as intermediaries between east and west until their sovereignty was snuffed out by the Soviet Union. Soviet power was used to forcibly sever the cultural and economic ties of the Silk Road region with its western, southern, and eastern neighbors. Because of the geographic determinism of Winston Churchill's famous 1946 address at Westminster College, we have grown accustomed to conceiving of the "Iron Curtain" as stretching across the continent of Europe. But there was no less an iron curtain running from the Bulgarian-Greek-Turkish frontier, across the Black and Caspian Seas, and dividing Transcaucasia and Central Asia from Turkey, Iran, and South Asia. After the Sino-Soviet split, there was a similar barrier isolating China from Central Asia.

After the Soviet Union collapsed, the artificial corralling of the region's trade and transport networks to run through the Russian center ended. Azerbaijan and other states in the region looked to re-establish their pre-Soviet contacts and connections. The driving imperative, however, was that the United States, in the formulation of *Die Zeit* publisher-editor Josef Joffe, would serve as the "hub" of the new global order.

During the 1990s, the focus for countries like Azerbaijan was to rebalance the northern vector (towards a post-Soviet Russia) with a western vector that would connect the Silk Road region to the United States via the trans-Atlantic corridor. Based on the geostrategic logic as outlined in Zbigniew Brzezinski's famous 1997 *Foreign Affairs* article ("A Geostrategy for Eurasia"), the Silk Road region would become the easternmost annex of the Euro-Atlantic world, while the rest of Asia would connect eastward across the Pacific into the American hub. The geographic concept of the "continental divide"—the point at which rivers on one side flow towards a different ocean than on the other—applied here: the Caspian Sea would serve as the geoeconomic continental divide between the Atlantic and Pacific basins.

The "hub and spokes" approach was grounded in an assumption that the United States would, for the foreseeable future, remain in what *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer had termed the "unipolar moment"—where no significant alternative centers of power would emerge in the international system—and that the United States would be able to redraw the political and economic geography of the region. This vision of the United States sitting at the center of a trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific network has not quite come to pass, both because the United States itself has turned away from this approach, especially under the Trump administration, but also because of the rise and resurgence of other major powers, starting with Russia and China.

For the countries of the Silk Road region, the new post-Soviet lines of communication westward are being augmented not only by a refurbished northern route but also the enhancing of eastward and southern connectivities to Southern and Eastern Asia and the Middle East. Competing and complementary projects—especially those sponsored by the United States, the European Union, and China—mean that the "geoeconomics of Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe are becoming spatially reconfigured by connectivity," as Leiden University's Mohammadbagher Forough has concluded. But it also requires a deft approach to balance and coordinate competing interests, especially to ensure that the region does not become a zone of geopolitical confrontation.

In general, the United States remains the principal hub of the global political and economic order, but there are other centers of power and influence emerging which

will make it very difficult for Washington to coordinate under a single agenda. This has created conditions that Ian Bremmer terms the GZero world—where the United States, on its own, can no longer set the global agenda but where no other power or group of stakeholders are prepared to take up those burdens, either. Each of the major powers also finds it more difficult to project and sustain power the further it extends from their core areas.

The Silk Road region is a particularly good example of a geography in which all major players have a presence, but no one player can dominate.

The Silk Road region is a particularly good example of a geography in which all major players have a presence, but no one player can dominate. And despite talk that in a GZero world globalization will continue to fracture, economic interconnectedness remains intact. In such conditions, it is incumbent on the states of the Silk Road region to guarantee that at least this major interlocking corridor between the world's principal political and economic centers remains open and functioning. In many respects, the Silk Road region reflects a state of affairs that Council of Foreign Relations president Richard Haass defines as "nonpolarity" in which regional security is determined "not by one or two even several states but rather by dozens of actors possessing and exercising various kinds of power."

As Richard Sokolsky and Eugene Rumer of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace conclude in a recent paper:

> The United States and China will remain superpowers in the major dimensions of power (that is, military, economic, technological, and diplomatic), but there will be multiple power centers—at both the international (like the United Nations) and regional levels, such as the European Union, India, Japan, and Russia in its self-proclaimed sphere of privileged interests—that are capable of exercising influence in specific areas. Nonstate actors like Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple—as well as transnational forces, such as pandemic diseases; jihadist terrorism; and populist, nationalist, and nativist movements—will affect global security and prosperity.

This creates conditions that Turkish political scientist Tarık Oguzlu describes as "contested multipolarity" as the United States loses its ability to unilaterally set the global agenda. This development is even more pronounced when one considers the balances of power in the greater Silk Road region. As Sokolsky and Rumer note, these factors "pose major obstacles to the emergence of a hegemonic power in the critical geopolitical regions of Eurasia."

Given this reality, the challenge for the countries of the Silk Road region is to ensure that the negative form of multipolarity—what the U.S. National Security Strategy describes as "great power competition"—does not produce contestation that will be destructive. The tragedies of Georgia (in 2008) and Ukraine (in 2014) are stark warnings of what happens when a country's preferred partner is unable or unwilling to offer effective security guarantees and other great powers are prepared to intervene—to the point of using force—to defend their interests. In short, governments in Tbilisi and Kyiv both hoped that a major superpower patron (namely, the United States) would be prepared to reshape the realities of both physical and political geography on their behalves—a task that Washington was neither able nor willing to fulfill.

If a great power patron that can protect its client from the vicissitudes of great power competition is unavailable, then an embrace of nonpolarity may make greater strategic sense. As a foreign policy strategy, the pursuit of nonpolarity within conditions of "contested multipolarity" expands on the concept of neutrality as the latter concept has traditionally been understood. Neutrality implies equidistance from all contenders, but often has conveyed a passive and even disengaged approach to world affairs, as reflected in Switzerland's decision for many decades not even to sign the Charter of the United Nations and join the organization. Nonpolarity, in contrast, is an active approach in which constant engagement with all the major stakeholders is a *sine qua non*. Nonpolarity recognizes that in conditions of a GZero world no one power can establish and guarantee absolute security or impose a uniform set of preferences—and that to align exclusively with one major power increases, rather than reduces, insecurity by incentivizing other powers to then take action detrimental to one's national interests.

Nonpolarity and Integrative Power

The Silk Road region is one of the few areas in the world where all the major global players have interests and influence. It is the point where the European Union's "eastern partnerships" and Western New Silk Road initiatives intersect with China's Belt and

Road Initiative and connect with the Indo-Iranian-Russian "north-south" route. When one looks at the major foreign investors in Azerbaijan, for instance, what is striking is that all five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus the leading countries of the European Union are represented, as well as key Middle Eastern players. Indeed, Azerbaijan is one of the few countries in the world where American, French, German, Turkish, Chinese, Iranian, Russian, Emirati, Dutch, Indian, and Japanese companies might end up as *de facto*—or even *de jure*—partners. Lastly, the Silk Road region is a place where all of the major military-security players and blocs have the ability to project power and to operate.

This means that no major power center can pursue what can be termed a "denial/compellence" strategy in the region: denying access to other key players while attempting to compel the countries of the region to exclusively affiliate to their position. Moreover, because of the intermodal linkages that crisscross the region, the benefits for keeping these ways open—the China to Europe east-west link, the north-south connection between Russia and Iran, the American transport corridor to Central Asia—are more important than risking a complete closure by trying to deny anyone else access.

The Silk Road region, both by virtue of physical and political geography, is not well set up to serve as the first type of geopolitical region: the frontline or barrier region. Places like the Baltic Sea littoral or the East Asian "first island chain" in the western Pacific form cohesive, compact territories that, while they are points of interchange between major powers, have had the opportunity to affiliate to a great power or regional security bloc in order to serve as an effective barrier that limits the ability of others to project influence. However, for this to work there needs to be a set of geographic and political criteria in place. In the case of the Baltic littoral, this region, although it borders Russia, is fully integrated into the European economic order and can be integrated under the defensive umbrella of the North Atlantic alliance. The East Asian island and peninsular states—Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines—all enjoy formal alliances with the United States that predate the rise of China.

The challenges of maintaining and expanding American alliances in the immediate post-Cold War period was relatively low, with costs quite manageable; but the further into the Silk Road region heartland the United States has attempted to expand, the higher have been the

associated costs. Moreover, in geographic terms, the United States, as a maritime power, finds it more difficult and costly to create bilateral security arrangements further inland where major continental powers enjoy a greater preponderance of influence and ability. The admission of the Baltic states, as well as the western Black Sea countries of Bulgaria and Romania, may have marked the high-water point for the expansion of NATO, while the United States has found limits in developing its "quartet" as a basis for South and East Asian regional security.

From the American perspective, the situation with regards to the Silk Road region, in contrast, is different: therein, it is far more expensive and dangerous for Washington to try to bar any major power's exercise of power and projection. Over the past several years, a series of crises and war scares—in Syria, the Black Sea, and the Persian Gulf—involving, at times, Turkey, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and members of the NATO alliance—all highlighted the risks that Azerbaijan and other countries of the region might face from choosing sides. And as China increases its footprint in the area and India expands its presence, this danger only increases. Moreover, the threat remains that the region could become a proxy battlefield in any sustained great power competition.

In order to avoid being torn apart by clashes between the major power centers, a sounder geopolitical strategy for the region consists in adopting an approach based on two concepts: integrative power and nonpolarity. With regards to integrative power, Amitai Etzioni defines it as the "ability to generate positive relationships," which can be

> derived from a number of sources: the existence of important transit and communications lines that are vital for trade traversing its territory; the position of the state to promote regional integration and collective security among its neighbors; its role as a point of passage between different blocs, or its position overlapping the spheres of influence of several different major actors, thus serving as a mediator between them; or its willingness to take up the role as a guaranteed barrier securing neighbors from attack.

In policy terms, a strategy of nonpolarity is executed by the practice of what Azerbaijani political scientists Anar Valiyev and Narmina Mamishova have described as "transactional neutrality." Transactional neutrality is based both on the countries of the region but also every major power center accepting the reality that the states

of the Silk Road region will have economic, political, and even security relationships with every great power and bloc and that these relationships will be non-exclusive. Within the region, a country would forgo the opportunity to enter into an exclusive relationship with one bloc (the neutrality part) but would purchase guarantees that it retains the sovereign right to make choices which may not always align with every preference of the outside actor.

Azerbaijan must embrace its position as a keystone state for a keystone region.

This would require the countries of the region to adopt the mindset of being "keystone states." As already noted above, such states are critical because they are located at the seams of the global system and serve as critical mediators between different major powers, acting as gateways between different blocs of states, regional associations, and civilizational groupings. For the Silk Road region to serve as a keystone, it requires its own keystone state to utilize its integrative power.

Per the assessment undertaken by Jafarova, Azerbaijan is poised to function as a leading "middle power" with both regional and global influence precisely because of its ability to coordinate the efforts to develop and maintain the Silk Road region as one of these globally vital keystone regions. It also means managing relations with the major power centers to incentivize their acceptance of the Silk Road region as a keystone region—that its effective neutrality and integrative position is a greater benefit than attempting to deny others access to the area. In other words, Azerbaijan must embrace its position as a keystone state for a keystone region.

Keystone State

In the immediate post-Soviet period, Azerbaijan and the other states of the region wanted to escape the legacy of imperial control from Moscow (both during the rule of the tsars as well as the Soviet experience) and firmly establish their independence and sovereignty.

To rebalance its international relations, a country like Azerbaijan had to pursue what in the short term would be a zero-sum approach; re-establishing former relationships (with Turkey and Iran) or new linkages (with Europe, the Middle East, India, and China) of necessity subtracted from the overall tally of Soviet-era connectivities with a post-Soviet Russia. Matters were not helped by a clumsy approach taken by Boris Yeltsin's administration, which attempted to corral the states of the Silk Road region into Russian-led regional institutions and tried to block the establishment of corridors and links that would bypass Russian territory. Moreover, in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, a post-Soviet Russia could not maintain the artificiality of an iron curtain in the Silk Road region, as not only Turkey and Iran but more importantly the European Union, NATO, and China could penetrate the region even without Russia's permission.

As long as Russia posed a threat to the independence of the states of the area, starting with Azerbaijan, it was only natural that governments in Baku and other capitals would seek partners that could counterbalance Moscow. However, President Heydar Aliyev correctly assessed that the United States or Europe would not be prepared to risk confronting Russia in order to fundamentally reorder the geopolitics and geoeconomics of the region. He instead committed Azerbaijan to a policy of favoritism towards none with all the major regional and global actors and to avoid dependence on any one power.

Azerbaijan's foreign policy is predicated on safeguarding open access to the region whilst ensuring it is not subject to the whims of the major players.

Under Heydar Aliyev's leadership, Azerbaijan sought to position itself as the central terminal uniting the north-south route from Europe through Russia and Iran to India with the emerging infrastructure network connecting China and the West. The government found ways to make sure that every key player had incentives to maintain Azerbaijan's stability and independence.

Baku marketed itself to Turkey and Europe as a source for Eurasian energy independent from Russia, but still found ways to give Moscow and Tehran stakes in its energy industry. It cultivated its position as a nominally Shia Muslim state interested in good ties with Israel without compromising its outreach to the Arab world and Iran. The Baku Process that has emerged from these dialogues further promotes interaction and discussion between the Council of Europe and the Islamic countries of the Middle East. Finally, in geoeconomic terms, Heydar Aliyev ensured that

positions in major energy and infrastructure projects were extended across a wide range of American, European, Middle Eastern, Russian, Eurasian, and Asian firms, so that no one would be excluded from the development of the country's oil and gas deposits and no one would have any incentive to block the shipment of these resources to global markets.

This approach has continued under the presidency of Ilham Aliyev. In a February 2019 interview, he stressed the importance of the region's keystone position:

> We live in this geography, in this region. Of course, relations with neighbors are of particular importance for any country. I believe that any country wants to see a friendly country in its vicinity. In recent years, we have further strengthened friendly relations with all our neighbors [...]. If we did not have good relations with our neighbors, could we have implemented energy and transport projects? Of course not! I have already mentioned that Azerbaijan has become a transport center of Eurasia. Could we have achieved this without our neighbors? Of course not! We are already creating a cooperation format covering a wider geography—not only with close neighbors. It is this format of cooperation that allows us the opportunity to successfully and promptly implement giant transnational projects. This is why such an approach is of strategic importance for us.

Azerbaijan's foreign policy is predicated on safeguarding open access to the region whilst ensuring it is not subject to the whims of the major players but has the military, economic, and political resources to project a degree of influence in world affairs. Azerbaijan also has a defense posture configured around what is sometimes termed the "porcupine defense"—having enough capabilities in play to make the costs of trying to use military force as a tool of coercion against the country too costly for any would-be aggressor.

In other words, Azerbaijan's embrace of a neutral status—formally affirmed in 2011 when the country became a member of the Non-aligned Movement—is taken from a position of strength, not weakness. This is because Azerbaijan, while not pursuing formal membership in different security institutions, does not keep its distance from them but engages with each—and uses that engagement to bolster its capabilities. As Baku-based regional analyst Rahim Rahimov concluded:

> Azerbaijan frames neutrality as key to its independent foreign policy. However, making a sovereign choice on which bloc (if any) to join is also an independent policy. Due to its small power limitations, Azerbaijan is not in a position to influence the positions of big powers or single-handedly change the regional geopolitical situation. Therefore, Baku pursues a foreign policy strategy that seeks to alter those aspects of the status quo it sees as unfavorable, instead of siding with a specific bloc. [...] Pursuit of this strategy, thus, has meant diversifying Azerbaijan's foreign policy partnerships with different multilateral unions and military alliances by developing closer ties with individual member states but without committing itself to any one specific bloc.

Moreover, for every move to engage with Western institutions, there is a corresponding initiative towards a non-Western organization. This is not, as Ilham Aliyev has noted, because the country is pursuing a balanced policy for the sake of balance, but comes out of an assessment of the country's national interest—and the importance of positioning the country as a keystone interlocutor and trusted intermediary. It is the outgrowth of what Valiyev and Mamishova describe as an "'interest-based' multidimensional policy."

But for a country that has investors from all the major players and has cargo transiting along east-west and north-south routes, having a state that can guarantee access through this important zone is critical. Thus, Azerbaijan is both a "dialogue partner" of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and has a robust partnership with NATO; it also has a bilateral security relationship with both Russia and the United States. This creates, in the words of Deputy Secretary General of NATO for Political Affairs and Security Policy James Appathurai, a "unique orientation: Baku is not an ally of Russia, but it does not seek membership in NATO," he continued. NATO has "excellent cooperation with Azerbaijan. A good example is that it hosts meetings between our military leadership and the Russian top military leadership on its territory. We are developing important cooperation in this direction."

This enables Azerbaijan, acting on behalf of the Silk Road region as a whole (one could say), to take important steps to secure it from the risks of geopolitical competition. For instance, the Caspian Convention neutralizes the sea, barring the military forces of any non-littoral states from operating there—which helps to reassure Russia and Iran, among others, that this vital maritime zone cannot become a vulnerability. This is why Caspian-Eurasia Center's director Ksenia Tyurenkova sees the ratification as setting a "new stage in [the] development of relations between the Caspian states, about [the] possibility of intensification of integration processes"—especially between Russia, Azerbaijan, and Iran.

At the same time, outside countries, starting with the United States, have worked to enhance Azerbaijan's own capabilities. The United States, the European Union, and even China can trust that Azerbaijan will be able to keep the Caspian Sea open for transit—whether U.S. assistance to Central Asia or Chinese shipping transiting to Europe. Thus, as member of the Majlis Rasim Musabeyov noted, "the strengthening of Azerbaijan's control over its land, sea, and air borders meets the strategic interests of the U.S., whose companies have invested many billions of dollars in oil and gas projects in the Caspian, and the U.S. military conducts transit to Afghanistan via Azerbaijan."

Similar trends can be observed in economic matters. Azerbaijan maintains trade relationships with both the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the European Union, but in a way that avoids the trap which befell the Ukrainians in 2013-2014 of having to choose between productive relations with both blocs. In fact, Azerbaijan is positioned to create preferential customs zones with both the EU and Russia, which makes Azerbaijan more attractive as a center for commerce and trade.

Moreover, Baku's engagement with both the EU and the EAEU does not come at the expense of taking part in the Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative. Thus, as member of the Majlis Javid Osmanov has noted: "Azerbaijan, which is one of the important countries of the historical Silk Road, located in the center of Eurasia, at the junction of East and West, today is actively involved in the creation of international trade corridors, based on its historical traditions." This includes the north-south corridor connecting Russia to Iran as well as the trans-Caspian cargo fleet and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway for east-west transit, with trade in all directions utilizing Baku cargo terminals and the Alat trade port.

For Moscow, the Azerbaijani keystone is essential as part of a much larger arc designed to connect the Arctic Ocean basin with the Indian Ocean. As Elkhan Alasgarov of the Baku Network concludes: "The geopolitical project of the North-South corridor, which is of strategic importance for Russia and which the country is implementing jointly with Azerbaijan and Iran, has its logical continuation to the East."

At the same time, Azerbaijan has been marketing itself as an alternative conduit for Russia to Western markets and as a sanctions-free interconnector between Europe and Russia. In turn, Europeans also see the benefits. Outgoing British MEP Sajjad Karim noted that Azerbaijan, as the keystone state of the region, "has the opportunity to be a real transport hub and a link between east and west, north and south. These are the ambitions that it has, and it's certainly in Europe's interest to be part of the attainment of those ambitions."

Strategic Hedging

In essence, Azerbaijan has decided on a foreign policy of not having to choose between good relations with Russia, China, and Iran, and good relations with the countries of the Middle East, the United States, and the European Union (the latter being Azerbaijan's single largest trading partner).

Because of this, Azerbaijan has emerged as a trusted mediator and interlocutor, bringing together partners, rivals, and competitors. As Ilham Aliyev himself noted, beyond Azerbaijan's bilateral relationships (with the U.S., Russia, Turkey, etc.) "there are already formats of trilateral and even quadrilateral cooperation with our neighbors. I should also note that Azerbaijan is the initiator of this."

At a time when most other channels of communication have closed, Azerbaijan serves as the host for regular meetings between senior Russian and American military officials, as noted above. Reiterating Appathurai's comments, it is not accidental that Baku was chosen to host these contacts—because both countries' military establishments have trust in their Azeri partners and view Baku as neutral ground. Azerbaijan has also emerged as the linchpin of the trilateral Russia-Iran-Azerbaijan and Russia-Turkey-Azerbaijan formats, and as one of the key bridges between OPEC and non-OPEC members in regulating and stabilizing global energy markets. Thus, Baku can emerge as one of the centers where the leading geopolitical players can dialogue—and this helps to sustain support among all for Azerbaijan's ability to maintain its independent stance.

Thus geographic position and the deft wielding of diplomacy allows Azerbaijan, on behalf of the larger Caspian area and perhaps the entire Silk Road region, to engage in "strategic hedging." Every major global actor now has an interest in maintaining an effective keystone region, because their own prosperity and security are best served by this arrangement. Rather than relying on great power competition and a zero-sum approach, Azerbaijan's focus is on complementarity, not rivalry, within the framework of a regional transport and energy hub in which all of these countries participate and benefit. No wonder that in that famous *Foreign Affairs* essay, Zbigniew Brzezinski concluded that Azerbaijan was a strategic pivot state. BD

Against 'the Blob'

America's Foreign Policy in Eurasia's Heartland is Becoming its Own Greatest Enemy

Michael A. Reynolds

As this article goes to press, America and the world are in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic's end remains invisible, yet it has already wreaked extraordinary economic disruption around the globe. Inevitably, political upheaval will follow. Indeed, the strain of the pandemic has now catalyzed social and political unrest throughout the United States on a level not seen in half a century.

America's weight in global affairs is such that no country on earth can be wholly indifferent to its fate. Decisions taken inside the United States are consequential to millions outside the United States, including Eurasia. Attaining a better understanding of the nature of the debates and intellectual currents that inform those decisions is essential for Americans and non-Americans alike, not least for decisionmakers in the Silk Road region of greater Eurasia.

The sources and causes of the unrest roiling America are manifold and predate the pandemic by years, even decades, and they have drawn Americans into a bitter feud over the very nature and value of their republic. The American *zeitgeist* today differs radically from that of the 1990s when American elites were basking in their victory in the Cold War, their unrivaled military and economic might, and, not least, the promise of globalization to transform the world in America's image and enrich themselves in the process. They speculated without irony that history had ended and

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culminated in liberal democracy, reveled in American unipolar dominance of the world order, and boasted—in the 1998 words of U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright—that "we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future."

Less than a year ago almost all America's elites still took for granted that their society presented a model for the globe to emulate. They regarded America's 1776 Declaration of Independence as a signal moment in world history—a milestone in a grand story of the of liberation of mankind from tyranny. Today, however, they increasingly describe their country as one founded on slavery and genocide and ask whether it can even be redeemed. For example, the country's largest newspaper, *The New York Times*, has embraced an initiative known as the "1619 Project" that portrays America as a country founded on slavery, not freedom. To be sure, much of this self-loathing is performative. Serious historians have noted the project's myriad scholarly shortcomings. It reflects a solipsism that only a superpower society could cultivate and indulge. Nonetheless, the ongoing feud over America's founding betrays genuine doubt about the exceptional nature of the United States. What is more, it grows out of cleavages that have been in formation for some time and will not disappear overnight. This shift in elite mindset ineluctably will effect a shift in American foreign policy.

Just as premonitions of tumult in American domestic politics have been visible for some time, forewarnings of a reckoning in American foreign policy have been surfacing with increasing frequency since the invasion of Iraq in 2003. From different parts of the political spectrum, more and more independent observers began concluding that something fundamental has gone wrong in American foreign policy. To state just one obvious point, despite spending trillions of dollars on wars and interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and elsewhere, Washington in the Middle East not only failed to achieve its objectives but often generated results precisely the opposite of what it sought. Successes elsewhere in American foreign policy have been rare.

Yet unlike the case with American domestic politics, where a remarkable constellation of elite interests, institutions, and corporations coalesced in support of those protesting (including the Democrat Party, American universities, The *New York Times* and

The Washington Post, J.P. Morgan, Apple, Amazon, and Major League Baseball, among others), in foreign policy the American establishment has remained stolidly united in favor of the status quo over the past decade and a half.

But as of late—perhaps for the first time since the Vietnam War—America's foreign policy and national security establishments have become targets of sustained criticism from journalists, veterans, academics, and politicians from all sides of the political spectrum. In a sign of the times, an off-hand remark made in 2016 by Ben Rhodes, at the time a senior aide to U.S. President Barack Obama, that disparaged Washington's foreign policy establishment as an expansive, relentless, and brainless "Blob" has stuck. Not the least of these critics has been America's president, Donald Trump, who owes his wholly improbable election in 2016 in part to his disparagement of Washington's foreign policy orthodoxy and who in his current re-election bid is reminding voters of his contrarian stance. This past year, a think-tank with funding from disparate ideological sources was founded in Washington under the name Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft for the explicit goal of overturning the "intellectual lethargy and dysfunction" in American foreign policy.

An indicator that this domestic criticism has begun to rattle America's foreign policy establishment came this spring when *Foreign Affairs*, the flagship journal of that establishment, struck back with a self-congratulatory apologia. The title of the article, "In Defense of the Blob: America's Foreign Policy Establishment Is the Solution, Not the Problem," made clear that *Foreign Affairs* imbibes what it has been prescribing for America's foreign policy: when in trouble, simply double down with more of the same.

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The authors of the article—Hal Brands, Peter Feaver, and Will Inboden (hereafter BFI)—are full time scholars and part-time practitioners with stints in government. As such, they should be as qualified as any to mount a persuasive defense. Their message is blunt. There are no grounds for any reckoning: the "establishment's practical track record has been impressive," they assert. "The Blob is not the problem. It is the solution."

Assessing a foreign policy track record is not simple. One factor complicating assessment is the difficulty of assessing the counterfactual, the road not taken. As BFI caution, "Critics count the problems that have occurred but ignore the problems that have been avoided." Another factor is the strategic essence of foreign policy; i.e. it is never unilateral, but always a product of interaction between two or more actors. A third is its contextual nature. A great power possessing abundant resources, for example, can mask chronic foreign policy failure in a way that small, vulnerable states with limited means cannot.

But to recognize that the assessment of foreign policy requires discernment is not to say it is impossible. Contra BFI, even a cursory examination of three key theaters—the Middle East, Russia (and its southern geographic periphery), and China, each of which is proximate to the Silk Road region—reveals that the track record of American foreign policy since the end of the Cold War has been impressive primarily in its litany of fumbling and failure.

Whereas between 1945 and 1991 America's foreign policy yielded a global victory over a formidable multidimensional enemy while managing to preserve the prosperity of Americans at home, since 1991 Washington's foreign policy has consumed exorbitant resources while delivering results opposite of what it intended and coinciding with the dangerous hollowing out of America's industrial base and declining prosperity and quality of life, especially for the middle class.

The Blob Strikes Back

The United States "has a healthy marketplace of foreign policy ideas," BFI assure us. "Discussion over American foreign policy," they contend, "is loud contentious, diverse, and generally pragmatic." Those of us old enough to remember the 2016 Republican Primary, however, may not be persuaded. Then-candidate Donald Trump stunned the Republican Party establishment and his rivals when at a debate in South Carolina he had the temerity to say that the invasion of Iraq "was a big, fat mistake" in presidential history.

Trump's comment was neither new nor outlandish. Eleven years earlier, former U.S. Army general and director of the National Security Agency William Odom predicted that "the invasion of Iraq may well turn out to be the greatest strategic disaster in American history." Subsequent history bore out Odom's prognostication. Yet

Trump's assessment of the most momentous foreign policy decision of the past three decades caught his fellow candidates, virtually all of whom were advised by foreign policy professionals from Washington, DC, dumbstruck. Perhaps noise from raucous foreign policy debates in Washington was still ringing in their advisors' heads.

This is not a partisan phenomenon. Obama as a candidate in 2008 pointed to his opposition to the Iraq war. In office, however, he acquiesced to the relentless pressure to intervene abroad, spurring Rhodes to coin the term "the Blob" and leading others, like the Fletcher School's Michael J. Glennon in his book *National Security and Double Government* (2016), to conclude that a national security state bureaucracy controls policy and is responsible for the uncanny continuity in foreign policy from Bush to Obama. Discussion of foreign policy in the Democrat Party's 2020 Presidential primaries was scant, and not coincidentally. The Democrat and media establishments smeared the one candidate who did question the wisdom of American military intervention, U.S. Army National Guard major and Iraq war veteran Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, as sympathetic to war criminals, insinuating that she is a tool of Russian.

In today's America, the use of insinuation to corral discussion of foreign policy is quotidian. The expansion of the country's military presence and security commitments around the world is an axiom of the Blob. As BFI write, the mere fact that post-Cold War presidents "maintained and even expanded the country's global network of alliances and military bases" is itself an achievement. It is as if expansion were the goal, not a means.

Those who question expansion for its own sake, let alone those who advocate retrenchment, the Blob reflexively labels "isolationists." The label "isolationist" implies the critic is, at best, a foreign policy simpleton: the kind who in the 1930s would have thought that the United States could have safely kept out of a war with Hitler. At worst, it suggests the critic might even be sympathetic to Hitler.

Similarly, BFI write that their opponents imagine "the Blob" as a *cabal*, a term derived from the Hebrew word for esoteric mysticism and one that denotes a small, secretive group. This is an odd diversion, given that the more influential critics of Washington's foreign policy consensus argue the opposite, namely that a broad bipartisan conglomeration of interlocking bureaucracies, think-tanks, and lobbies constitutes the Blob.

The reason why the term "the Blob" caught on is because it captures this sprawling essence. The term "cabal" thus is a gross misrepresentation, but it is an effective term for discrediting one's opponents as wild-eyed, tin-foil hat wearing "conspiracy theorists," or to hint that they may be dabbling in the worst kind of conspiracy thinking, the antisemitic kind.

A broad bipartisan conglomeration of interlocking bureaucracies, think-tanks, and lobbies constitutes the Blob.

Impugning the moral character of one's intellectual opponents can be an effective tactic to control political debates, but reliance on it corrodes clear thinking. Indeed, the "In Defense of the Blob" article betrays some of this corrosion. BFI's argument that Washington, DC, hosts a wide-ranging foreign policy debate parallels in uncanny ways the arguments of those who contend that American universities are citadels of free and open discussion of ideas.

To counter arguments and evidence that American universities have shifted markedly to the left in recent decades and therefore host a steadily narrowing range of viewpoints on campus, university presidents, deans, and faculty have generally responded in three ways. First, engage in denial, often by pointing to the vast array of scholarly journals, books, workshops, and conferences as evidence that intellectual debate on American campuses is open and vigorous. Second, argue that the political imbalance is a feature, not a bug, as it reflects simply the intellectual and moral superiority of some ideas over others. Third, remind listeners that American universities are the envy of the world, whatever their flaws.

BFI attempt all three. The Blob's expert community, they tell us, is "large and heterogeneous," makes available "vast amounts of technocratic knowledge and institutional memory," and supports an impossible range of opinions. "Pick any policy issue, and you can put together a lively debate with ease," BFI assure us. "Other countries," they chasten their doubting reader, "simply do not have comparably large, diverse, permeable, expert communities that encourage vigorous debate over national policy." Indeed, those "other countries would love to have such a Blob of their own."

Signature Pathologies

Significantly, BFI concede that the Blob has presided over "disappointments and even disasters." For instance, they write, "far

too many military interventions—from Somalia to Afghanistan, Iraq to Libya—have been misconceived and mishandled," they acknowledge. Their phrase "from Somalia to Afghanistan, Iraq to Libya" would suggest that they recognize that error has been the rule, not the exception. Yet they decline to own this and investigate the Blob's blundering, and opt instead for a classic dodge: the so-called "past exonerative"—the passive admission that mistakes were made.

On the flip side, BFI credit American post-Cold War policy for the fact that "billions of people" in East Asia "benefited from decades of sustained economic growth," as if the extraordinary growth of the Chinese economy was not the primary driver of this epic transformation. America did play a role. But, alas, it was not simply through the provision of security that American taxpayers subsidized East Asia's economic growth from 1979, but also through the transfer to China of much of their industrial base, technology, and scientific know-how from the 1990s onward.

The reluctance to confront failure is common. And in their effort to burnish the Blob's reputation, BFI employ the common tactic of tarnishing that of their predecessors. In doing so, they betray a signature pathology of the Blob: the inability to conceive of limits to America's power or responsibility. Thus, they charge the Cold War class with "losing" China, failing to preserve a nuclear monopoly, not stopping the Berlin Wall, and not preventing the Tiananmen Square massacre. The reality is these events were amenable to American influence only partially or not at all.

A signature pathology of the Blob: the inability to conceive of limits to America's power or responsibility.

A dangerous lack of self-awareness is another closely related defect of the Blob. Absent from the *Foreign Affairs* article is any appreciation of the fact that America (like any other country) has limited resources. Without a sense of limits, policymakers have little incentive think about how prioritize. Prioritization, however, is absolutely essential to long-term success. It is what separates plans from wish lists.

What has allowed American policymakers to avoid the questions of limits and priorities is the belief that America is on a quasi-divine grant or mission to remake the world, and that whatever resources its expends toward that end are multiplied as in a virtuous circle.

America's expansion of democracy and free markets, the belief is, rests on a synergistic dynamic wherein rising prosperity feeds a desire for more freedom and hence democracy, which in turn creates more friends and allies of America and more trade and prosperity.

The notion that America is obligated and empowered to mold the nations of the world in its image is an assertion, not a statement of empirical fact. Yet, BFI insist, "the American foreign policy establishment is generally more pragmatic than ideological." Anyone who doubts that ideology profoundly shaped the foreign policies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama need only read their administrations' words and look at their deeds. In 2002, Condoleezza Rice explained that Bush's national security strategy "calls on America to use our position of unparalleled strength and influence to create a balance of power that favors freedom." America will rely on a "paradigm of progress, founded on political and economic liberty [...] to bring every nation into an expanding circle of development." Bush hardened and sharpened his ideology in 2005, positioning America in a grand metaphysical struggle with a single, clear, and simple choice: freedom or oppression. "We will," he promised, "persistently clarify the choice before every ruler and every nation." Bush imagined a world historical spirit worthy of Hegel: "History has an ebb and flow of justice, but history also has a visible direction, set by liberty and the Author of Liberty."

The belief that History will vanquish America's foes and redeem Washington is faith-based and facile, neither pragmatic nor wise.

Obama was not as Manichean as Bush, but he was still more insistent that history had a right side and a wrong side. The "arc of history that bends toward justice," was no mere ornament of Obama's rhetoric, but an ordering principle of his worldview and foreign policy. Speaking of the fight against ISIS, Obama declared, "I am confident we will succeed in this mission because we are on the right side of history." When Moscow annexed Crimea, he scolded, "Russia is on the wrong side of history on this." His Secretary of State, John Kerry, rebuked Russia with precisely the same words. The belief that History will vanquish America's foes and redeem Washington is faith-based and facile, neither pragmatic nor wise.

Sand Trap

The greater Middle East revealed the depth of the Blob's ideological delusion. Washington undertook the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq with the objectives of vanquishing al-Qaeda in the short-term and catalyzing the "paradigm of progress" that over the long-term would allow democracy to take root and cause radical Islam and other forms of violent extremism to dissipate.

That vision was not simplistic, and it was, by its own logic, not unreasonable. It was, however, wholly unreal. Convinced that humanity's only real choice was between freedom or oppression, and that history moves ineluctably toward the former, the Blob was convinced that so long as America acted boldly and resolutely, its success was foreordained.

To realize its vision, the Blob disposed of staggering resources. As scholars like Stephen Walt and Andrew Krepinevich have pointed out, Washington spent on its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq some four to six trillion dollars, or several times more what China is investing in its massive Belt and Road initiative, or tens of times more than the cost of the Marshall Plan. And yet the Blob achieved the very contrary of what it had intended. Al-Qaeda remains in the field and, in fact, the jihadist movement has metastasized. According to a 2018 study issued by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the number of jihadis has more than doubled since 2001. The Islamic State superseded al-Qaeda in both organization and the virulence of ideology. Iraq never became an outpost of democratization, but it did become an outpost of Iranian influence and incubator of the Islamic State.

Despite fighting in Afghanistan for over 18 years and spending between one and two trillion dollars on reconstruction, development, and democracy promotion, the United States today is reduced to negotiating the terms of its withdrawal with the Taliban—the opponent it overthrew with great fanfare in 2001. Washington is now estranged from the one Muslim society with a democratic government and tradition, Turkey, in no small measure due to policies it felt compelled to adopt to contain the Islamic State.

The debacle of Afghanistan—it bears remembering—was not a single, discrete error. It was instead an error repeated over and over, as Washington obstinately clung to its strategy year after year. Blinded by its ideology to the failures unfolding before its eyes, the Blob acted out the quotidian definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over while expecting a different result.

Bush set a pattern of failure, but Obama followed his trail. Obama's innate skittishness preserved him from committing a blunder as great as the invasion of Iraq. But the faith of Obama and his team that history inevitably breaks toward democracy left them prey to their own conceits, most notably during the Arab Spring when they interpreted the burgeoning protests and unrest rippling through multiple Arab countries as the long-awaited moment when a younger and more liberal generation would rise and pull their societies out from oppressive torpor.

In Egypt, the Obama administration facilitated the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood by withdrawing support from the senescent Hosni Mubarak. But when just two years later the Egyptian armed forces toppled the elected government of Muhammad Morsi, the administration could only watch awkwardly as the cycle of repression came full circle. It declined to call the coup a coup, as American law would then block weapons sales to Egypt. Obama's Washington had shown itself by turns to be irresolute, feckless, and cynical. In Libya, it jubilantly helped topple another repressive regime, but that country became a redoubt of ISIS and site of an ongoing civil war.

Obama's intervention in Syria was coyer, but no more clear-eyed. As unrest and rebellion against Bashar Assad spread in August 2011, Obama inserted himself. Not unlike a Marxist who interpreted events only as struggles between a progressive proletariat and reactionary capital, Obama—like Bush—saw only democrats and dictators. "The United States," he announced, "has been inspired by the Syrian people's pursuit of a peaceful transition to democracy." The "repressive tactics of the past," Obama warned Assad, would no longer work, and so, in clear signal that he expected Assad to go, he announced, "the time has come for President Assad to step aside."

The arc of history failed to bend, however, and the repressive tactics of the past became the effective ones of the present. Obama then authorized American military and intelligence bodies to arm and train Syrian rebels in what become one of history's largest "covert" operations. The effort quickly became another large and embarrassing American failure, as it recruited a pathetically small number of fighters and fell apart. Matters took a surreal turn in 2015 when former CIA director and retired general David Petraeus advocated that the United States "peel-off [...] moderates" from Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate. Only in America, one might jest, could

al-Qaeda members become partners in the war on terror.

Next door in Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria scattered the Iraqi army on which Washington had lavished so much. Adding insult to injury, ISIS seized copious stockpiles of American arms, treating the world to the sight of jihadists driving American-made M1 Abrams tanks into battle. Washington then countered those jihadists by collaborating with a Kurdish group that it knew well to be a subsidiary of the most lethal foe of Turkey. It was a reckless betrayal of a treaty ally. Meanwhile, as Washington flailed around harming friends and aiding foes, Russia stepped in and decisively altered the course of the Syrian Civil War with the deployment of a modest amount of airpower, managing to build closer ties to Turkey, Israel, and others in the process.

Mother Goose Tussling with Russia

This brings us to the Eurasian heartland. Toward Russia, the Blob is schizoid, careening between two incompatible readings of the country. One is contemptuous of Russia as an economically feeble, demographically dying, militarily overstretched kleptocracy that is dependent on the export of hydrocarbons. As the late Senator John McCain famously put it, "Russia is a gas station masquerading as a country." Obama dismissed Russia as a "regional power" with an "economy in tatters" and politically "isolated." Vice President Joe Biden in July 2009 clucked that America need not work too hard on relations with Russia since time is on America's side. Russia's troubles are such that it will have no choice but to bow to American pressure. Duke University's Peter Feaver—the 'F' in the subsequently BFI-authored "In Defense of the Blob" article—the following day enthusiastically endorsed Biden's opinion and in a demonstration of bipartisan simpatico likened Russia to an adolescent and its behaviors to "tantrums." In so doing, Feaver revealed another curiosity of the bipartisan Blob: its proclivity to imagine America not as the world's policeman so much as the world's nanny, there to scold, punish, and praise as appropriate the other, more immature members of the family of nations. This might be called the "Mother Goose" theory of American statecraft.

Yet simultaneously the Blob presents Russia as a grave menace, capable of overrunning NATO territory and manipulating American public opinion and even elections. There is undoubtedly an element of bureaucratic self-interest here. The Cold War birthed and shaped much of America's national security establishment, and the contemporary portrayal of a revanchist Russia legitimizes much of the same force structures. This is not to mention the multiple functions that hysteria over Russia has served in American domestic politics since 2016, including deflecting blame for Hillary Clinton's stunning defeat and undermining Donald Trump by suggesting that he is a Russian tool. Playing up the Russian threat legitimates large swathes of contemporary Washington.

In reality, outside of a nuclear exchange it is almost impossible to contend that Russia today threatens vital American interests. A comparison with the Soviet threat is telling. The Soviet Union was an enormous entity with seemingly inexhaustible human and natural resources, massive military and nuclear forces, and a formidable network of satellites and allies around the world. Not least, it espoused a revolutionary ideology, Marxist-Leninism, that fired imaginations and ambitions of millions around the globe and targeted Western society for destruction. Yet the United States managed to contain and prevail over the Soviet Union without military bases between the Baltic and Black Seas and while securing prosperity for its citizens at home.

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BFI draw an unwarranted equivalence between the Blob and expertise. The problem is not that the vast American establishment do not possess talented and informed people, but that it cannot use such assets better. NATO expansion is a telling—and important—example. Expert opinion was overwhelmingly against it. Not only did George Kennan, one of America's best Russia experts and perhaps its greatest diplomat, oppose NATO expansion, so did hawkish experts such as Paul Nitze, Richard Pipes, and Fred Iklé, among many others. NATO expansion, these experts warned, would do nothing to improve American security but would inevitably alienate the Russian people, not just the leadership. Strobe Talbott, Bill Clinton's point man on NATO expansion, lamented that everyone in expert circles opposed enlargement. Nonetheless, NATO expanded.

When issuing their admonitions about NATO enlargement, the aforementioned architects of

America's Cold War strategy probably never anticipated the amateurism of their successors. In May 2008, George W. Bush declared at a conference in Bucharest that Georgia and Ukraine would become members of NATO, overriding the express wishes of America's French and German allies. It was a wildly provocative move. Whereas Georgia and Ukraine could in no way be regarded as "vital" to the United States or of NATO, as neighbors of Russia they are by definition of special concern to Moscow. Georgia borders the most sensitive part of the Russian Federation, Chechnya, where Russia was then fighting an active Islamist insurgency that had made use of Georgian territory for supply. Ukraine, aside from its size and location, is the cradle of Russian culture and identity. One can insist that Russia's strategic and cultural sensitivities should be irrelevant, since Georgia and Ukraine are sovereign nation-states. That might be true from an ideological and legalistic standpoint, but is thoroughly false from a prudential, pragmatic, and political one.

First Georgia...

Washington's recklessness extended into involvement in Georgian and Ukrainian politics. The Bush administration had embraced Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili tightly. The young Georgian's enthusiasm for the United States was especially welcome at a time when America's international prestige was at a low as a result of the moldering intervention in Iraq. Bush visited the mountainous country, hailed Georgia as a "beacon of liberty" in the broader region, and the Georgians named a prominent thoroughfare in their capital after him.

Yet for all its celebration of partnership with Georgia, Washington was inattentive to the country, and the outbreak of war caught Washington shamefully flatfooted. When the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency received news of the war, he was uncertain who in his agency was responsible for Georgia and had to scramble to get personnel there. The Bush White House, according to then-National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, ran hot with talk of hitting the Russians hard. At least, that is, until Hadley essentially posed the question: "Are we ready to go to war with Russia over Georgia?" Hadley's query brought the discussion to a halt, since the answer was obvious. But that question should have been asked—and answered—in Bucharest in May.

Another question that America's foreign policy professionals should have asked earlier, is with whom were they partnering on the periphery of Eurasia? It was Saakashvili who had ignited the war when he ordered Georgian forces to retake the breakaway republic of South Ossetia. Saakashvili, in the words of then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, was "capricious" and a "firebrand." Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was still more direct, describing the Georgian president as an "aggressive and impetuous nationalist."

Russia's rout of Georgia was another fiasco of Blob expansionism. In defeating Saakashvili, Vladimir Putin had demonstrated that he understood better than Washington's professionals the low value that Washington assigned to Georgia. When push had come to shove, Washington balked, supplying some humanitarian aid and flying a Georgian brigade back home from Iraq, where the Georgian soldiers had been deployed to shore up the pretense that Washington was leading a multinational coalition there. Reflecting on the war, CIA director Hayden confessed the United States "came up short." And the CIA, he said, "had not given Hadley or anyone else any warning of the conflict, even though it was our friends, the Georgians, who had precipitated it."

Another question that America's foreign policy professionals should have asked earlier, is with whom were they partnering on the periphery of Eurasia?

Bush left office with a Russian policy in tatters. Obama's team, too, combined striking lapses in professionalism with autopilot overextension. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recognized that Bush had bungled with Russia to America's detriment and sought to repair matters. She stumbled out of the gate, however, when, in a bid to signal the Obama administration's desire for a new start in relations, she handed her Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, a gimmicky red button reading in big bold letters "Reset" in English and "*Peregruzka*" in Russian. As Lavrov stood holding the button, Clinton asked whether the Russian translation was correct, adding, "We worked hard to get the Russian word right." An uncomfortable Lavrov could answer only, "No." The Americans had not translated the word properly. The word *peregruzka* means "overload." Her staff might have tried a little harder and looked at a dictionary.

Such rank amateurism was an embarrassing start, but it was not the end of embarrassment. Right

before taking up his post in 2012, Obama's handpicked envoy to Moscow Michael McFaul described himself to the Russian media as "a specialist on democracy, anti-dictatorial movements, on revolutions" and added that this was the reason behind his appointment as ambassador. It takes a certain *chutzpah* to go to Moscow boasting of expertise in social movements and revolutions. That McFaul was not by profession a diplomat became painfully obvious when he violated the first rule of diplomacy and publicly insulted his host state by calling Russia "a savage country" in front of a Russian television crew. McFaul was understandably frustrated by the crew's relentless tracking of him, but the optics were damning. Not much in McFaul's tenure as ambassador was successful, and he resigned his post in February 2014.

...Then Ukraine...

As in Georgia, the United States has little at stake in Ukraine and the conflict there has done nothing to advance American interests. Once again, key foreign policy officials demonstrated a greater talent for provocation than for professionalism. When in December 2013 demonstrators in favor of an association agreement with the European Union took to Maidan square in Ukraine's capital, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland arrived on the scene to show her support, demonstratively sticking loaves of bread into the hands of often uncomprehending people standing on the Maidan. It was a curious act of street theater, particularly for a diplomat, but Nuland made her point that American officials would play a role in Ukraine. Similarly, McCain and other American politicians flew to Kyiv to speak to anti-government crowds on the Maidan, adding to the pageantry.

In February 2014, tensions on the Maidan exploded in violence. Ukraine's president fled to Moscow, converting Ukraine's simmering internal crisis into an acute international one. Moscow labeled the event an illegal coup. As Washington was instructing Russia not to meddle in Ukraine's internal politics and that "it is up to the Ukrainian people to decide their future," a recording of a conversation where Nuland and the American ambassador to Ukraine discuss who should and should not serve in the new government and how to achieve this outcome surfaced. In the discussion Nuland used a profanity to dismiss the European Union. It was a triple embarrassment. In a stroke it left no doubt about American involvement in Ukrainian affairs, revealed the disdain of prominent American diplomats for America's allies, and demonstrated again an American inability to maintain secure communications. Coming on the heels of the Wikileaks, Edward Snowden, and Chelsea Manning scandals, the lax communication discipline shown by State Department officials was another worrying indicator of slipping professional standards.

For American foreign policy, the fall of the pro-Russian Ukrainian president did initially appear to be a coup, in the sense of a stroke of success. But true to the predictions of the manifold American experts who had cautioned against NATO enlargement, Russia was willing to fight, and responded to America's involvement promptly by seizing the Crimean Peninsula and raising insurrections in eastern Ukraine. Washington was again caught flat-footed, confused, and unsure how to respond, because, rhetoric aside, it had little at stake in Ukraine. Once again, a forward leaning foreign policy that cannot distinguish between vital and other interests had needlessly placed America in an exposed position.

It is still harder to see how picking and then losing fights in Eurasia either benefits America or deters bullying.

The standoff in and over Ukraine continues. Ukraine remains fractured, corrupt, and economically sputtering. While it is true that Russia has suffered from the ongoing stalemate, the United States has not won anything from a crisis that it did so much to escalate. As the title of a 2017 study of the conflict issued by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) puts it, "Everyone Loses."

That the cases of Ukraine and Georgia represent clear-cut failures of reckless American overextension is not the unduly harsh assessment of an outside academic, but the judgment of one of America's most experienced foreign policy insiders, former Director of the CIA and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who wrote forthrightly that "trying to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO was truly overreaching." Yet BFI assert, "It is hard to see how [...] not expanding NATO would have encouraged less bullying from Moscow." It is still harder to see how picking and then losing fights in Eurasia either benefits America or deters bullying. The electoral crisis brewing in Belarus at the time of writing may well reveal both the fragility of that country's ruling regime and the anemic condition

of Putin's Russia. The outcome regardless can contribute little to American security, and the asymmetry in the stakes involved promises a perpetual volatility.

...Now China

The rise of China presents a challenge far greater than those of the Middle East or Russia, as China is a continental-sized power that possesses the population, economy, technological base, military capacity, and social cohesion that match or supersede those of the United States. To get China right truly is vital. Thus far the Blob has not. BFI do acknowledge this rather important point, but shy from exploring it.

U.S. President Richard Nixon's opening to China in 1972 is acknowledged as a master stroke in the Cold War. Whereas catechizing schoolmarms can see non-democracies only as a homogenous class of miscreants, Nixon understood geography and context. By reaching out to Mao, incidentally one of history's most odious actors, Nixon outflanked the Soviets in Asia and helped check their global ambitions precisely when the United States was reeling from overextension in Vietnam and a stagnant, inflationary economy at home.

Contrast that with the post-Cold War record on China. Two decades ago, Washington wagered that "globalization," e.g. the admission of China to the WTO and the transfer of America's industrial base there, would, in BFI's words, "mellow" China and help it "fit easily into the U.S.-led order." Today we know this wager was a loser. BFI correctly describe Trump's refusal to accept China's exploitative trade practices as "overdue." But this raises the question of why it required an outsider to get something so fundamental right? The rise of China has been long in the making and open in plain sight. According to the World Bank, in 1991 China's GDP was $383 billion. In 2018 it was $13.6 trillion. The coronavirus pandemic revealed some important things about China and its relations with America.

One is America's mortal dependence on China for medical and pharmaceutical products. Another is that China prioritizes the lives of its citizens over those of Americans and will deploy its economic capacity accordingly. A third is that China has not mellowed but grown contemptuous of the United States. Far from composing a picture of resolve and competence, the foreign policy failures noted above have compounded the signal that America's mismanagement of its economy has sent to China. One may argue how to apportion blame for this between Trump's missteps and those of his predecessors, but from Beijing's perspective they are all American.

This is not the place for a comprehensive account of why the Blob failed to recognize and adapt to such a momentous change. A willful self-delusion fed by a corporate interest in easy profits from China's cheaper labor and manufacturing costs is one part. Another source of delusion was Washington's conviction that global "free trade" is sacrosanct, good in and of itself and indistinguishable from America's national interest, and its corollary that a trade war with China could only be ruinous. Addled by such dogma and distracted by its pursuit of secondary and tertiary interests in other parts of the globe, the Blob allowed America to slide into a dangerous position vis-à-vis China.

Unsustainable

To return to the theme raised at the opening of this article: America is now undergoing a domestic crisis over its very legitimacy. The coronavirus touched off, but did not cause, this crisis. Large sectors of America's elites have welcomed and fanned the crisis for a mix of motives. Nonetheless, the crisis is rooted in a genuine clash over America's worth as a civilization, and it portends an inevitable shake up in foreign policy, including in the Silk Road region.

But whereas in this domestic crisis a large portion of America's elites are insistent on change, in the sphere of foreign policy the elites have maintained a robust consensus in favor of the status quo. Since the end of the Cold War, that consensus has equated the American national interest with the expansion of America's military alliances and presence around the world, prioritizing global trade over the maintenance of industry at home, and the liberal use of military, covert, and other forms of intervention to promote the establishment of regimes led by local elites amenable to the American-led international order. This consensus has persisted despite overwhelming evidence that post-Cold War American foreign policy has been ineffective, even self-destructive.

A coalescing of critiques in the past year has finally compelled the foreign policy establishment

to begin defending its record and assumptions. BFI's "In Defense of the Blob" represents one prominent apologetic. Yet far from reassuring the reader about the future of American foreign policy, instead the article displays some of the pathologies of the Blob's worldview and thought processes. BFI's readers are left to conclude that America's foreign policy establishment is stubbornly resistant to understanding how fundamentally it has failed in past two decades in critical theatres such as the greater Middle East and the broader Silk Road region, and how much the world has changed in the meantime. Sapped internally by a domestic crisis of legitimacy and crippled by a foreign policy apparatus that is prideful, blind, and bullheaded, America has become its own greatest enemy. BD

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Not A Top European Priority

Can the EU Engage Geopolitically in the South Caucasus?

Amanda Paul

The European Union has been active in the South Caucasus since Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia regained independence in 1991. While the EU has established itself as an important partner for all three states over the past three decades, the South Caucasus is certainly not a top foreign policy priority for Brussels. Despite hopes that EU policies could act as transformative tools to help strengthen stability, security, and democracy as well as bring about a more cohesive and resilient region, the results have been rather patchy from the EU's perspective. Likewise, expectations that the EU would develop a more geostrategic and security orientated policy in order to balance Russia have been dashed.

Over the past few years a series of internal crises, confrontation with Russia, wars in Ukraine and Syria, a fractured trans-Atlantic alliance, and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic have consumed the EU, leaving the South Caucasus somewhat detached from its agenda. Yet the combination of all these developments have also had an impact on the geopolitics and stability of the region—as have the recent skirmishes at the Armenia-Azerbaijan border—making EU engagement there more important than ever.

This essay will look at the objectives and impact of EU policies in the South Caucasus. It starts with an overview of the EU's involvement in the region and the evolution of its policies. It then goes on to address the EU's performance as a security actor. Finally, it takes a look at the influence of other external actors, such as Russia, China, and Turkey, their cooperation with the three regional states, and how their influence is shifting the geopolitical landscape of the region. A final section argues that if the EU wants to achieve the goal of becoming a geopolitical power, as set by European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen, much will depend on how it deals with its neighborhood, including the South Caucasus.

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The EU's Expanding Presence

The history of the South Caucasus since the re-emergence of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia as independent countries has been turbulent. Almost thirty years on, the three states are still dogged by conflict and closed borders, with the region remaining highly congested militarily. The region's three protracted conflicts, Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan and Armenia) and South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Georgia), act as a handbrake on sustainable peace, economic development and prosperity, and efforts to create effective regional cooperation. Rather, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have integrated into a wide-range of different, sometimes opposing, organizations and alliances. Long influenced by three powerful neighbors (Russia, Turkey, and Iran), the arrival of the United States, the EU, and most recently China to the region over the last three decades has intensified geopolitical rivalries.

If the EU wants to achieve the goal of becoming a geopolitical power, much will depend on how it deals with its neighborhood, including the South Caucasus.

The EU joined the mix of actors and organizations engaged in the South Caucasus in the early 1990s. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the EU did not rush to the region. In large part this was due to the Union's attention being focused on developments in East-Central Europe following the collapse of the Iron Curtain, along with the unfolding wars in the Western Balkans. Both of these developments represented a direct threat to EU stability and security; upheavals in the South Caucasus did not. However, this relative lack of attention was also due to the EU not viewing the South Caucasus as its neighborhood. Rather it was seen as a remote place viewed through the prism of Russia.

During the 1990s only a handful of EU member states opened embassies in the South Caucasus states. At this time the EU's main involvement was related to humanitarian and financial assistance. The Union was the biggest financer of development projects in the region between 1991 and 2000, investing well over €1 billion in the three states. Keen to diversify their foreign policies to reduce Russian dominance (as was the case with other former Soviet countries), Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia signed partnership and cooperation agreements (PCAs) with the EU, which opened the way for greater political dialogue and economic cooperation. Yet these agreements were both significantly lighter in content and more limited in scope when compared to those signed with countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Russia, which also included the prospect of a Free Trade Area with the EU.

During the 1990s only a handful of EU member states opened embassies in the South Caucasus states.

Non-EU actors, notably Turkey and the United States, played much bigger roles (as did Russia, obviously). With Turkey at that time strongly anchored to the Euro-Atlantic community, Ankara wanted to bring the region closer to the West as a way to strengthen regional stability and security. During the 1990s, Turkey supported the integration processes of the South Caucasus states with the West via their integration into the Council of Europe, OSCE, NATO, and the EU, as well as through regional projects, including those related to transport, such as the East-West Corridor. The United States played a central role in developing the region's energy resources. It began with the 1994 U.S.-backed "Contract of the Century" that Azerbaijan signed with a group of largely Western partners. This major development broke Russia's hold on Caspian oil and gas transportation and paved the way for the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline as well as the subsequent Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline.

A big boost in ties with the EU came in the 2000s when the three states became part of the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004 and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009. Yet when the ENP was launched in 2003, the three South Caucasus countries were not initially included, only being mentioned in a footnote to the policy as possible neighbors. This again reflected the EU's failure to view them as part of its direct neighborhood.

However, much has changed since then. Over the years the EU has intensified its political and economic ties with all three countries. This happened for several reasons. First, eastward enlargement in 2004 and 2007 brought the South Caucasus geographically closer to the EU across the Black Sea. Second, Georgia's 2003 Rose Revolution resulted in the country's new president, Mikheil Saakashvili, making Euro-Atlantic integration a priority.

Indeed, Saakashvili played an important role in the eventual inclusion of the South Caucasus in the ENP. Without his active lobbying, the region may never have become part of the ENP. The 2008 Russia-Georgia war was a further important milestone. In the aftermath of the conflict, the EU increased its visibility in the region, becoming the main security actor in Georgia with the deployment of its EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM). Third, the EU was keen to develop energy relations with Azerbaijan as a way to strengthen Western efforts to diversify routes and sources of natural gas to reduce dependence on Russia. This culminated in the development of the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC), which is expected to become operational by the end of 2020. The region has also become a central part of the EU's connectivity strategy—portrayed by the EU as its answer to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—which has gained significant traction in EaP states, including those located in the South Caucasus.

ENP and EaP Impact

The ENP aimed to strengthen stability, security, and prosperity in the EU's eastern and southern neighborhoods. As then-European Commission president Romano Prodi put it, the EU wanted to build a ring of well-governed states around the EU. However, the ENP had little overall impact in terms of bringing about real change. It had a very technical, one-policy-fits-all approach, offering only vague incentives combined with unclear conditionality and almost zero local ownership. It also required rather unclear commitments from partner countries.

Frankly, the EU focus on the wide-scale export of EU standards was rather unrealistic. It was also viewed as a rather "one-way street," meaning partner countries felt they were not in a partnership with the EU, but rather were being dictated to by Brussels as if they were the pupil and the EU was the teacher.

The ENP was also eurocentric in conception and broadly ignored the roles outside actors play in the EU's neighborhood—not least Russia—and their impact on the region. Furthermore, the security rationale underlying the ENP did not translate into an increased EU role in conflict resolution in the South Caucasus, despite the ENP citing conflict resolution as an EU priority.

The EaP was developed in 2009 to differentiate between southern and eastern partners in the ENP. Since its inception, it has brought the three South Caucasus states closer to the EU in accordance to their individual preferences, ambitions, and starting points. EaP put on the table a strengthened contractual framework through Association Agreements (AAs) and Deep and Comprehensive Free-Trade Areas (DCFTAs), as well as through the gradual liberalization of respective visa regimes and increased sectoral cooperation.

Based on a "more for more" or "less for less" approach, the EaP offered a further opportunity for the three countries to strengthen political and economic ties with the EU—albeit to different degrees and based on their own interests and priorities. While Georgia continues to aspire for full EU membership, Armenia and Azerbaijan have chosen "tailor made" relations in line with the EU's differentiated approach, meaning each country has a different type of agreement with the EU.

Today, cooperation between the three South Caucasus countries and the EU covers everything from trade, cyber-security, and security sector reform to education, counter-terrorism, human rights dialogues, and disinformation. The EU is now the biggest trade partner of all three countries. It has also been the biggest provider of humanitarian assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic via its Team Europe Package, putting on the table some €92 million. This is an enormous sum, particularly when compared to other actors such as the United States, which only provided some $2 million in assistance, and Russia and China, which provided no financial support at all (although the Jack Ma Foundation and the Alibaba Foundation, amongst other Chinese philanthropies, sent large quantities of emergency supplies to Azerbaijan in the form of medical masks, test kits, protective suits, ventilators, and thermal imagers; and Beijing sent significant humanitarian aid to Armenia and Georgia).

In parallel, all three countries have focused on strengthening political and economic ties with individual EU member states, particularly with Germany and France. Yet Tbilisi's efforts to convince EU capitals that Georgia's EU membership would have added value for the European Union—and that there is a need for a more robust EU response to Russian aggression in their country—has more or less fallen on deaf ears (with the exception of Poland and the three Baltic states).

When it comes to Azerbaijan and Armenia, both have lobbied for greater economic cooperation and investment opportunities. In particular, Azerbaijan has worked hard to establish fruitful ties in terms of energy cooperation with EU member states, including with Hungary, Greece, and Italy. Both Baku and Yerevan have also focused on efforts to win support for their positions on Nagorno-Karabakh from both national parliaments and governments. Local diaspora communities, along with business communities and other actors, also play a central role. This operation is also carried on into the European Parliament, with regular battles over the wording of EP reports and resolutions. To say there is Nagorno-Karabakh fatigue in the EU institutions would be an understatement.

The EU's respective bilateral agendas with the three South Caucasus states have started to become rather lackluster and bogged-down.

Yet despite many positive developments, the EU's respective bilateral agendas with the three South Caucasus states have started to become rather lackluster and bogged-down. Armenia joined the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union in January 2015 after Moscow more or less forced Yerevan to abandon talks with the EU for an AA in 2013. Moreover, notwithstanding the fact that Yerevan signed a new Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the EU in November 2017, Armenia has moved slowly in its implementation, despite having a new, reform-minded government. Meanwhile, despite years of negotiations for a new strategic agreement with Azerbaijan, talks have stalled.

With the exception of Georgia, real reform (as the EU understands it) has been rather thin on the ground. Where reform has taken place, implementation has often been adversely affected by poor administrative capacities, weak institutional coordination, and vested interests. The leverage the EU believed it could have, together with the conditionality

it believed it could place, has not always been there. The ability of the three countries to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed serious weaknesses. Georgia has most capably handled the pandemic, in large part due to Tbilisi's efforts to reform and professionalize its civil service and to crack down on corruption. Heightened public trust in professionals has also contributed to better compliance with emergency regulations and guidance on behavior during the pandemic.

Overall, the slow pace of reform can be put down to three factors: a large extend to a lack of political will from regional elites to implement massive and often costly reforms; the challenge of uprooting the networks of vested interests that have dominated key bodies such as judiciaries for years; and weak civil societies unable to wield influence over political elites, which makes a bottom-up approach to reform more difficult to achieve.

However, there is an additional issue. The EU's approach broadly failed to adequately calculate the geopolitical realities on the ground in the South Caucasus and the threat that all three states continue to feel from Russia. The integration processes used by the EU, while being seen as technical rather than geostrategic instruments by Brussels have been viewed by the Kremlin as something aimed at undermining what Russia considers to be within the sphere of its vital interests. This has sometimes put leaderships in a tight spot, as Yerevan found out in 2013. Furthermore, Russia has shown it is ready to use force to achieve what it wants—namely to screw up the integration of EaP states with the EU and rattle the Union's cage, in the knowledge that EU member states have little appetite to seriously challenge Russia in the South Caucasus, particularly on security issues.

The EU's goal of creating a more cohesive region has also not been achieved. In fact quite the opposite as happened. With EaP having both a bilateral and multilateral dimension, it was hoped that the multilateral track could be a useful framework for representatives of the three South Caucasus states to meet and foster ties (including via the Civil Society Forum and within the framework of EURONEST), ultimately leading to stronger regional cooperation. The fact that each state has chosen a different geopolitical trajectory and a different type of relationship with the EU has led to greater fragmentation. Moreover, for Georgia, the lack of long-term EU membership perspective is becoming increasingly frustrating.

But in all frankness, EU enlargement vis-à-vis the South Caucasus will remain off the table for the duration of this European Commission at least, if not forever. The series of crises that the EU has undergone over the past few years—including the eurozone and migration crises, Brexit, the rise of populism, and the COVID-19 pandemic—has dulled the appetite for further enlargement and left the EU very focused on internal matters. Armenia's progress towards starting talks for visa liberalization with the EU were effectively delayed because of attitudes towards migration within the EU. Getting unanimity from 27 EU member states on foreign policy has become an exercise akin to herding cats in a sack. Hence while the EU continues to "go through the motions" of saying that the EaP remains a top priority, beyond visible support for Ukraine, the EU's focus is clearly elsewhere. The South Caucasus in particular seems to have disappeared from the EU's agenda to a large extent.

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EU as Security Actor

During the 1990s and for a large part of the 2000s, the EU was not directly engaged in security and conflict resolution issues in the South Caucasus. This in part can be put down to the fact that a number of international (not least Russia) and multilateral (the UN and the OSCE) actors had been present in the region since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. However, it was also due to a lack of appetite on the part of the EU.

Still, the EU has progressively recognized the importance of improving security and stability in its eastern neighborhood as a way to strengthen its own security and resilience. This came to the fore in the aftermath of the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, and more recently following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and ongoing war in the Donbas—and even more recently due to conflict in Syria and Libya. The Black Sea region in particular has become a stage of geopolitical competition between the West and Russia. The Kremlin is determined to prevent the further fragmentation of Russian influence. Moscow sees no way to do this without maintaining buffer states and imposing its will on neighbors to secure its borders.

Numerous EU documents, going as far back as 2003, highlight the need for Brussels to take a more active role in the

problems of the South Caucasus. This has resulted in the establishment of the post of Special Representative for the South Caucasus. We also saw the publication of a 2006 European Commission report on the implementation of the ENP, which underlined the need for the EU to "be more active in addressing frozen conflicts." Most recently, a November 2015 review of the ENP reiterates the EU's commitment to fostering stability, security, and prosperity that states the EU should use all means available to support the management of crises and the settlement of protracted conflicts in the neighborhood. The EU's 2016 Global Strategy also mentions building up the resilience of neighbors to prevent insecurity spilling over into the EU.

As was the case with the Western Balkans, the EU hoped that soft power tools could be used to bring about change that would lead to greater democracy, which could in turn have a positive impact on peace processes and increase stability. However, the South Caucasus is not the Western Balkans. The EU chose to focus on the partner countries' reform processes as a first step to conflict resolution, focusing on the role of good governance and rule of law as key drivers of security and stability. Both the EU's assistance and conditionality were supposed to drive reforms in key sectors (e.g. justice, security sector reform) with the aim of strengthening democratic institutions and ultimately contributing to a more positive climate for conflict settlement. However, this long-term approach stumbled against regional realities. For example, the EU's emphasis on the rule of law as a preliminary condition for stability was at odds with Georgia's prioritization of territorial integrity and the reintegration of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Something similar could be said with regards to Azerbaijan.

A Status Quo Actor

As noted above, the security landscape in Georgia and the South Caucasus more broadly was transformed by the Russia-Georgia war and Moscow's subsequent recognition of both regions. The EU brokered the ceasefire and took on a key post-conflict role. The EU became a main security actor in both post-conflict theaters, deploying its EUMM and becoming a co-chair of the multi-party Geneva International Discussions (GID) aimed at finding a solution to the two disputes. However, the six-point peace plan remains only partially implemented by Russia and there has been little effort to adequately engage Moscow on this issue. For example, the EUMM has so far been denied access to the occupied territories by Russia and the de facto authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The GID talks have effectively stalled. Nevertheless, while the GID process has not achieved much concrete progress in terms of agreements between the conflict parties—Russia continues to insist that it is not even a party in the conflict—the EUSR has played an important role by keeping the negotiations going even though the process has become little more than a talking shop. As is often the case, the status quo has become comfortable.

When the EU's former foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini visited the South Caucasus in March 2016, she was quoted as saying that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was a top priority. In reality the EU has chosen to take a back seat in the peace process, being satisfied to continue to simply support the efforts of the OSCE Minsk Group in which France is a co-chair alongside Russia and the United States. Multi-year negotiations are stalled on a set of Basic Principles, with tensions in and around the line of contact remaining high. A series of incidents on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border that began in mid-July 2020 resulted in casualties on both sides—including the taking of civilian lives—received little attention from the EU other than the standard statement expressing concern. Indeed, with regards to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, the EU narrative is so weak as to be hardly noticeable.

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In fact, the EU does not have a policy on the conflict. Unlike in other conflicts in the Black Sea region, the EU has tried to maintain a balanced position between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This was evident from differences between the two ENP Action Plan texts related to the conflict. While the conflict's settlement is the first priority under the EU-Azerbaijan ENP Action Plan, it is ranked seventh in the text concluded with Armenia. The latter also mentions the principle of the right to self-determination of peoples, which is not included in the Azerbaijani Action Plan. This damaged the EU's reputation in Azerbaijan. As underlined by Svante

Cornell, a leading Western expert on the South Caucasus, "with the Action Plans the EU played a worse than passive role. It was actively sowing confusion and contradicting international principles into the conflict." However, in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the onset of war in the Donbas, the European Union expressed clear support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, rather than its hitherto rather tight-lipped approach.

The EU's failure to respond to Russian aggression against Georgia weakened the belief in the ability of the West to counter Moscow's power projection or provide security guarantees to countries in the region.

The mandate of the EUSR vis-à-vis Nagorno-Karabakh is limited to supporting the official mediation efforts of the Minsk Group and its co-chairs. This includes having direct dialogue with the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia and supporting confidence building measures (CBMs). The EU is not ready to take on a role in the conflict that goes beyond its traditional soft power, bottom-up approach (promoting people-to-people contacts and similar peacebuilding initiatives). Only in the event that a political agreement is reached would the EU be ready to do more.

Yet because the EU does not adequately address the main problems Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are facing—namely those concerned with security—it is broadly viewed as a weak player that has little appetite for power. The EU's failure to respond to Russian aggression against Georgia weakened the belief in the ability of the West to counter Moscow's power projection or provide security guarantees to countries in the region. This vision was reinforced by the Kremlin's annexation of Crimea and developments in the Black Sea whereby Russia shored up its military presence. In short, when it comes to security issues there has been no EU appetite to further challenge Russia over its malign activities. Ultimately, the EU lacks a clear vision of how to contribute to the region's security: so far, Brussels has been unwilling to invest the political and diplomatic capital necessary to significantly advance regional peace.

Russia

Russia has increasingly come to see the South Caucasus region as a pivot through which it can present itself as a key player in the Black Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Caspian Sea regions. Therefore, the South Caucasus is part of a more extensive Russian southern strategy, aiming at projecting power across what some have taken to calling the Silk Road region.

Russia's influence in the South Caucasus is certainly not the same as it was some years ago. Russian language use is declining, Russian television viewership has declined precipitately, and ethnic Russians comprise less than 5 percent of the population of each of the South Caucasus states. Furthermore, with the country in poor economic health, and with Russia having heavy financial commitments in eastern Ukraine and Syria, Moscow hardly has money to throw at the South Caucasus. Nevertheless, Russia remains a very influential player. While the region may not be Russia's top foreign policy priority, the South Caucasus remains more important to Russia than for any other external player. Moscow thus concerns itself with reducing the influence of other powers, including the EU, which Russia continues to consider a normative-civilizational competitor in the shared neighborhood.

The South Caucasus remains more important to Russia than for any other external player.

Albeit in different ways, Russia remains deeply embedded in all three South Caucasus countries. Moscow has important and influential networks, including ties with the militaries of all three states. Yet Russia has already achieved many of its objectives. It has more or less blocked Georgia's path to NATO membership, with the same fate likely to meet Georgia's EU aspirations. It has forced Yerevan, which depends on Russia for its security, to join the EAEU and renounce plans to sign an AA with the EU. And despite the efforts of Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan to reduce Russia's influence over the country, he has had little success so far and regularly finds himself pandering to Vladimir Putin. Moscow has had a more accommodating and flexible approach to Azerbaijan, which has consistently followed a "balancing" foreign policy between the West and Russia. So far, the Kremlin has not countered Baku on this score whilst ensuring that Azerbaijan does not cross Russia's interests.

To a large extent, Russia has played a key role in the stalemate the three states currently have with the EU. Russia uses it military bases in Georgia's occupied territories to project power across the region.

It is also able to manipulate both Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, in which Moscow plays a deft game of "good cop, bad cop" whereby it simultaneously presents itself as peacemaker whilst selling arms to both Yerevan and Baku, playing the two countries off each other.

The future shape of Russia's ties with the West will also have a significant impact on the South Caucasus. Russia has long called for a "Yalta 2"-type conference to work out a new European security architecture. French president Emmanuel Macron has been a leading voice calling for rapprochement with Russia. He opened the door for Russia's recent return to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the restoration of military cooperation between France and Russia. He also insists that pushing Russia away from the EU is a profound strategic error that will result in an isolated Russia, increasing tensions with the West or deepening alliances with in particular, China. In short, Macron claims that Russia could eventually be lost to Beijing's economic, military, and technological superiority.

While the EU remains committed to its current sanctions policy vis-à-vis Russia at present, Macron's message has gained traction with other EU member states. Such a rapprochement would clearly impact the calculus in the foreign policies of the three South Caucasus states as it would carry a risk of increasing the Kremlin's influence in the region. However, given that many EU member states continue to view Russia as a threat to their security, not only from the Kremlin's hard power projection but also due to Russia's interference in elections, rapprochement is still seen as a far-fetched scenario.

Reducing Russia's influence remains a priority of all three South Caucasus countries and efforts to deepen political and economic ties with other partners countries continues apace.

Other Players

Aside from the EU and Russia, there are four other powers with interests in the South Caucasus: the United States, Turkey, Iran, and China. Each will be addressed in turn, beginning with America. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia would each welcome renewed interest and engagement from Washington. While America remains a key partner for Georgia in terms of defense cooperation, the sort of political engagement that existed in the 1990s is missing. However, renewed engagement goes against the retrenchment trend that is currently in vogue in official Washington.

The American withdrawal from the region began under the Obama administration in the context of its reset policy with Russia and has further gathered speed under the Trump administration. Washington's attention is far more focused on the Indo-Pacific region and countering China. There is no reason to believe that this would change in the event Joe Biden is elected president. The fact that the United States is no longer so interested in the region is crucial in the calculus of the three South Caucasus states in terms of managing their ties with other partners.

Aside from the EU and Russia, there are four other powers with interests in the South Caucasus: the United States, Turkey, Iran, and China.

While economic cooperation with the EU remains crucially important for all three countries, efforts to strengthen ties with other neighbors and external powers has been a priority. In this sense, Eurasian connectivity through the employment of various formats has been boosted. For instance, cooperation between Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia has been particularly successful.

Over the past two decades there has been a surge in ties between the three states. Differences in foreign and security policies have been put to one side as the three states have strengthened cooperation in the economic, political, and defense spheres. This has effectively culminated in a trilateral alliance, paying economic dividends to all three countries whilst deepening Turkey's regional footprint. It has also deepened Azerbaijan's influence in both Turkey and Georgia. Although projects like the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway have transformed Azerbaijan and Georgia into a connectivity hub between Europe and Asia, they have still to deliver real economic benefits.

Iran has significant interests in the region and views it as part of a common Iranian cultural area. Like Russia, it has not welcomed regional activities by external powers, in particular the United States. As a Shia nation and with some 30 million ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Iran, Baku has often had a challenging relationship with Iran. Efforts by Tehran to export its brand of Islam have created tensions over the years. Furthermore, the fact that Iran is viewed as a key partner of Armenia is also an irritant. Incidents like Iran delivering oil to the occupied

region of Nagorno-Karabakh are very testing.

Still, the South Caucasus is not Iran's top foreign policy priority: the Middle East, and to a lesser degree Afghanistan, ranks higher. Nevertheless, Iran is engaged in a number of different strategic projects, particularly in the energy sector, with both Azerbaijan and Armenia. However, since the United States pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal, launched its "maximum pressure" campaign against Tehran, and re-imposed sanctions on the country, many of the Islamic Republic's economic projects have been floored. The sanctions bar American companies from trading with Iran, but also with foreign firms or countries that are dealing with Iran.

Lastly, China. The three South Caucasus states have been eager to strengthen ties with Beijing. Despite Russia and Iran opposing foreign actors engaging with the South Caucasus, the fact that China's integration projects exclude the United States are supported as they are viewed as undermining America's presence in the region

While the South Caucasus cannot be described as priority area in China's foreign policy, there has nevertheless been an increase in the Middle Kingdom's presence in the region. The region is of interest to Beijing as an important part of its BRI and investment strategy. This importance was reflected in the May 2019 visit of Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi to all three countries. As China aims to diversify its trade routes, the South Caucasus offers an alternative and shorter route to conduct part of its trade. In May 2017, Tbilisi concluded a free trade agreement with Beijing, which made Georgia the only post-Soviet country to have such a deal with both the EU and China. Meanwhile, the South Caucasus states—particularly Azerbaijan and Georgia—see China's BRI and the EU's connectivity strategy as being congruent with their respective foreign policy agendas, which aim to transform their countries into regional connectivity hubs.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, China targeted the leaders and the general publics of the South Caucasus, including using the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to promote its narrative about its response to the pandemic. In its effort to make inroads, China sent high-profile humanitarian and medical aid missions and promoted its digital technologies, including 5G, as the means to keep the virus from spreading. While there is an obvious interest in adopting 5G technology, the three South Caucasus states are likely

to face increasing pressure from the United States to abstain from using the Chinese version. Furthermore, it remains to seen how the COVID-19 pandemic will impact on China's BRI and consequently far-flung regions such as the South Caucasus where Chinese influence is still rather nascent.

The EU's Bottom Line

The South Caucasus has gained more prominence in EU foreign policy over the last three decades. New bilateral and multilateral framework agreements established with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have strengthened political and economic ties. Nevertheless, today the South Caucasus is not a priority for the EU or for any of its member states. Because there is no direct border with the EU, the three countries are broadly viewed as being less important than, say, Ukraine, which is a direct neighbor. Relations between the EU and all three South Caucasus countries have reached a stalemate, which needs to be overcome. Furthermore, despite its increased regional footprint, the EU has become less central to the dynamics in the region compared to regional powers Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

The EU lacks a clear strategic vision and coherent policy. It should be more strategic and less patronizing. Its actions must reflect its words. Furthermore, there has been a tendency to view developments in the South Caucasus through liberal democratic lenses, failing to take into account the bigger picture, particularly related to the security environment and the influence of other actors when designing policy instruments. This has sometimes led to ruling elites having to pacify Russia.

However, when compared to other external actors, the EU is broadly viewed positively, particularly among young people. Efforts by EU Delegations to promote the EU throughout the South Caucasus via different tools, ranging from conferences and workshops to cultural events, have been successful. These activities have played a key role in increasing the EU's visibility. One of the results has been an increase in young people from the South Caucasus studying in universities in some EU member states, or taking part in EU educational programs.

As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia are facing an unprecedented challenge. The pandemic will exacerbate many pre-existing conditions like poverty and mistrust in political elites. While the EU is also suffering from the

same crisis, it is important that the EU continues to support the South Caucasus: the risk of the region's problems affecting the EU should not be overlooked. With Russia and Turkey having also been very badly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, neither country can offer the South Caucasus solutions to its economic and social challenges. On the contrary, the Kremlin has a history of exploiting the internal and external fragility of all three countries.

The three South Caucasus states have been eager to strengthen ties with Beijing.

There is an opportunity for the EU to demonstrate that it can become a "top-tier geostrategic actor," as EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell recently put it. When considering ways to reduce the risks of economic overdependence on China—not least because of long supply chains—EU businesses should look to the South Caucasus as three countries that can provide a workforce that has the potential to produce goods at a high standard of quality. This would not only significantly shorten supply chains, but also strengthen EU-compatible rules-based economic and political systems.

The EU also needs to sharpen its tools of engagement with the region when it comes to security. Here too Brussels should be more strategic and its actions must reflect its words. In a speech earlier this year, German foreign minister Heiko Maas claimed that, regardless of the outcome of America's presidential election in November, the EU and its member states "will have to think about how to better contain the conflicts in Europe's vicinity, even without the United States."

There are a number of steps that could be taken in this respect. First, the mandate of the EUSR should be reviewed and revamped to include a coordinating role in developing and delivering strategic engagement with the region. At the moment the EUSR is appointed by, and reports to, EU member states. This has its benefits, but in order to increase coherence he and his team need to be better integrated in the EEAS's structure. Second, given it has been more than a decade since the EUMM was first deployed, it needs to be reviewed to ensure that it continues to be fit for purpose. Third, the region's unresolved conflicts will play a key role in how the region will evolve in the future. The high level of engagement that the EU current has with the conflicts in Georgia should be maintained.

When it comes to Nagorno-Karabakh, more focus should be placed on efforts to help bring about a solution including continuing support for peacebuilding efforts.

Moreover, the EU needs to maintain a united front when it comes to Russia. A rapprochement with Russia which could lead to the lifting of sanctions that were put in place following its annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas would be a very wrong move. The EU would be seen as rewarding Putin even though he hasn't moved an inch on anything.

With increased engagement in the South Caucasus by other regional actors and China, including via different alliance structures, coupled with a lack of U.S. interest in the region, the geopolitical chess board in the South Caucasus is in flux. The EU needs to double down on its engagement. It should make a clearer geopolitical commitment with a more geostrategic and security-oriented policy.

If the EU fails to do this, it could have implications for all three countries. Most particularly, a decrease of Western support for Georgia risks sapping the country's resolve to pursue pro-Western policies. As Macron has warned, Europe could "disappear geopolitically" unless it begins to act as a strategic power. This sort of action should start in its own neighborhood. BD

Five-Star Hubs

Conceptual Key to Innovation and Prosperity

Taleh Ziyadov

One thousand years ago two fundamental human concepts, namely history and time, were united for the first time by a great figure of the Silk Road region. Serving at the court of Qabus ibn Wushmagir (a great scion of the Ziyarid dynasty that ruled over the Southern Caspian basin in present-day Iran), a young man of around thirty by the name of Abu Rayhan Muhammad al-Biruni was provided with the wherewithal to engage in a lifelong, systematic quest to try to understand nations and societies—irrespective of geographic or cultural provenance—as they understood themselves. Surpassing even Herodotus and Thucydides in investigative open-mindedness, Biruni also went on to become the first to standardize a single, objective timescale measuring system or matrix within which all of the particulars of human history could be compared chronologically side by side.

In his book *Lost Enlightenment* (2013), a preeminent Western scholar of the Silk Road region, S. Frederick Starr, did much to shed light on this largely forgotten figure of the golden age of this part of the world. One of the most interesting episodes in the life of this great man of inquiry is a fascinating and virtually unprecedented correspondence he maintained for two years with Avicenna (Ibn Sina), including an enlightening epistolary exchange on the interpretation of the Aristotelian corpus that touched upon various aspects of philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and the like. Although its details fall beyond the scope of this essay, it is sufficient to say, for present purposes, that Biruni stressed time and again that "evidence, not authority, is what counted," as Starr put it.

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Biruni's legacy helps remind us that for a millennia or more, the very name and scope of the Silk Road region (otherwise known as the Greater Caspian Region, Central Eurasia, or several other names) invokes the memory of a long-dormant economic legacy that brought great benefits to a vast and multi-civilizational region for centuries. Invoking Biruni today allows us also to recall how the cities and ports of this immensely diverse region were home to one of the most significant endeavors of economic, intellectual, and cultural exchange in human history. Commercial trade in goods, services, people, arts, technology, and ideas flowed unhindered between Europe and Asia across thousands of kilometers by land and sea. In notable ways, the ancient Silk Road was a precursor of the modern concept of globalization.

Biruni's intellectual output also reminds us how the network of ancient Silk Roads brought wealth and prosperity to the region's inhabitants; but also that this wealth served as a catalyst for creativity that drove human development far into the future. Coeval with the great ancient Silk Road network were major breakthrough discoveries in mathematics, astronomy, geometry, medicine, and other areas of theoretical and practical knowledge that impacted profoundly on the advance of human civilization. Ulugh Beg's *Star Catalogue* (1437), for example, was drafted in Samarkand and listed more than one thousand stars; centuries later it guided western European sailors on their many world-opening voyages of discovery. Similarly, Avicenna's *Canon of Medicine*, written on the basis of consultations of books in prominent Silk Road region libraries at Isfahan and Hamadan, remained a principal manual for European medicine over the next 500 years.

Along with the exchange of goods went the exchange of new ideas and technologies, enriching and advancing the development of societies along the ancient Silk Road. Great cities like Xian, Bukhara, Samarkand, Merv, Balkh, Tabriz, Isfahan, Baghdad, Aleppo, and Istanbul emerged or grew and acted as strategic commercial hubs, connecting and nourishing continents and civilizations. The thriving trade between these and other hubs remained the backbone of the region's economic prosperity for centuries.

The Silk Road region began to fade in importance for a number of reasons, including the Crusades, waves of pestilence, and Mongol conquest. Then, around the dawn of the European Industrial Revolution and the entrenchment of colonialism, significant parts of the

Silk Road region entered into a deep period of economic hibernation.

As the geography of capital flows was reoriented, investment dried up, and the ties that bound the Silk Road region together began to fall apart. As other parts of the world prospered, much of the region fell behind. Inventions like steamboats, ocean-going vessels, and shipping containers further changed the fortunes of the once-affluent, land-based Silk Road across Central Eurasia.

Today, most Euro-Asian trade bypasses the region, and so do the attendant benefits. Large ships carrying thousands of containers have replaced the ancient camel caravans. They now carry most of the trade between Europe and Asia via the Suez Canal; this constitutes more than 90 percent of all cargo exchanged between the two continents.

Revival Initiatives

In September 2013, during a visit by Chinese president Xi Jinping to Kazakhstan, he and his host Nursultan Nazarbayev breathed new life into the idea of reviving the once prosperous ancient Silk Road through the unveiling of the One Belt, One Road initiative.

Conceptual predecessors from the 1990s include the EU's Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia (TRACECA) program, which in 2004 fell under the umbrella of the Baku Initiative and aimed to foster cooperation in transportation infrastructure in the context of the EU's Neighbourhood Policy. Then, in 2007, the EU adopted its initial Strategy for a New Partnership with the countries of Central Asia. Just like with various initiatives with regards to the South Caucasus (e.g. the Eastern Partnership program, sundry Association Agreements, and free trade deals), it too prioritized upgrading transport, energy, and digital infrastructure.

The United States also had the idea to strategically revive the ancient Silk Road. In 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton unveiled a vision of regional economic integration and infrastructure connectivity under the New Silk Road moniker, as part of a plan to enhance the political stability of Afghanistan. This later become subsumed as one aspect of the Obama Administration's "pivot to Asia."

Meanwhile, One Belt, One Road became officially known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and was subsequently declared by the Chinese government to constitute its global development strategy. Such a declaration provoked politicians and specialists from around the world into questioning its motivation. Does BRI constitute China's support for global development and infrastructure; or is Beijing seeking long-term global domination through BRI? Xi Jinping has consistently emphasized economic interdependence, underscoring that BRI aims to reconnect three continents covering a population of 4,4 billion people, and some have estimated its total investment output to be in the neighborhood of $20 trillion by its anticipated completion in the middle of the century. Xi has also spoken of BRI's ultimate aim to establish an "open and peaceful community of shared interests, responsibilities, and commitments to freer trade, integrated economic growth, and cultural enrichment."

To that end, China has reached out to a number of regions, offering soft loans, building roads and railways, funding and/or buying key infrastructure projects, including ports. So far, the Chinese have spent some $200 billion on BRI-related projects, and total investment could reach $1.3 trillion by 2027. In providing financial and development assistance to neighbors and BRI participating states, China aims to connect its internal hard infrastructure and diversify its sources of imports—energy-related and otherwise.

The European Union's newest strategy paper on Central Asia, which came out in May 2019, also prioritizes connectivity whilst placing greater emphasis on the importance of establishing partnerships in regulatory and standard setting.

However, it was a 2018 document that truly systematized the EU's approach to the Silk Road region, officially called the Connecting Europe and Asia: Building Blocks for an EU Strategy. This document came to be adopted in the wake of an important European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) study that calculated the total cost of the region's infrastructure requirements in the transportation, energy, ICT, and water areas to be €1.2 trillion over a five year period (2018-2022).

The 2018 document defined, for the first time, the EU's "vision for a new and comprehensive strategy to better connect Europe and Asia." It thus represents the bloc's intention for full-on engagement with the Silk Road region as a whole. This flagship EU communication contains "concrete policy proposals and initiatives to improve connections between Europe and Asia, including through interoperable transport, energy, and digital networks." It also defines the "European way" of approaching investments in

connectivity: these need to be "sustainable, comprehensive, and rules-based," it says—or as the EU's then-foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini defined it, connectivity is understood to be the sum total of both "the physical and non-physical infrastructure through which goods, services, ideas, and people can flow unhindered."

According to the EU's 2018 strategy, sustainability refers not only to high environmental standards, but also to social, economic, and fiscal dimensions. The document's reference to a comprehensive approach indicates a desire to promote the EU internal market's free movement of people, goods, and services as a model to emulate, including lessening the regulatory burden on trade. Thus, the EU seeks to promote regional integration within the Silk Road geography through its 2018 strategy. Lastly, the emphasis on a rules-based approach is meant to assure a level playing field for economic operators competing in a well-regulated market, including transparency in procurement procedures.

The core economic logic of the ancient Silk Road was not about connecting roads and building infrastructure. It was about hubs and their contributions to the social and economic prosperity of their host societies.

In other words, the EU stresses that connectivity is as much about, to emphasize Mogherini's words, "physical" infrastructure (e.g. railways, roads, pipelines) as it is about its "non-physical" aspects (e.g. customs procedures, legal frameworks, technical standards). This holistic approach—the "European way," as the strategy puts it—is meant to be contrasted to the perceived ways of others.

Ancient Hubs, not Roads

For the countries of the Silk Road region, the fundamental question is this: how will all these plans, strategies, and initiatives impact on their economies? How will they help growth and prosperity? For us in Azerbaijan, there is an additional question—the answer to which we believe could have a positive impact on the geography of the entire region: how can Azerbaijan's hub strategy contribute to building the twenty-first-century Silk Road?

We can begin with a basic question: what was the economic basis of the ancient Silk Road? Understanding this will help explain the

nature of the emerging twenty-first century version. Unlike today's great maritime ports, the leading commercial cities of the Silk Road region were land-based hubs. They served as critical logistics and distribution centers for merchants caravanning on journeys lasting months and even years spanning three continents. These hubs all hosted caravanserais, where goods and ideas were exchanged, and people and cultures met and mixed.

Cooperation between neighboring countries as well as with the world's major economies is vital to the success of the region as a whole

These trading centers varied in function as much as they varied in their respective contributions to economic growth: some were just small and modest stopover places, others were great cities acting as hives of commerce and innovation. Think of a vast number of one-star, three-star, and five-star hotels scattered across Eurasia, connected by a network of continental routes and corridors. While one-star stopovers offered just food and accommodation, five-star trading megacities were the ancient equivalent of Silicon Valley: places in which vibrant commercial activity also engendered science, technology, ideas, innovation, and enlightenment.

In other words, the core economic logic of the ancient Silk Road was not about connecting roads and building infrastructure. It was about hubs and their contributions to the social and economic prosperity of their host societies.

In my view, the twenty-first century version of the Silk Road will depend on getting all the relevant stakeholders to work in common cause to build and connect twenty-first century hubs that together contribute to regional social and economic prosperity.

Three Phases

Many will continue to speculate about the true nature and potential impact of not only BRI but also its alternative models whilst seeking clarity on the important question of whether they are ultimately complementary. Yet the prevailing view amongst policymakers in the Silk Road region is that a way can be found to ensure each contributes positively to the emergence and development of new hubs across our geography. That is certainly the Chinese view, and it also seems to be that of the EU.

This last speaks, in my opinion, to the necessity of adopting a hub strategy for the region; this, in turn, necessitates a three-phase path of development. First, each country in the Silk Road geography must ensure its infrastructure is up to international standards. Without good roads, railways, ports, and airports, no state can hope to achieve economic development and will surely lose out in the competition for key hub status along the twenty-first century Silk Road. The task for governments across the region is clear: build the core infrastructure that will match the ambitions of the twenty-first century.

Second, once the internal infrastructure is made fit for purpose, connectivity becomes the critical issue. Most countries in the Silk Road region are landlocked and depend on each other for import/export and transit activity. Consequently, mechanisms of smooth connectivity need to be put in place between the region's roads and railways, on the one hand, and major markets like those represented by the European Union and China, on the other hand. Clearly, cooperation between neighboring countries as well as with the world's major economies is vital to the success of the region as a whole.

Third, over the next decade or two, the Belt and Road Initiative will bring about major transformations across the Silk Road geography—all the more so when put alongside the plans, strategies, and initiatives of others. A robust network of innovative twenty-first-century interconnecting hubs is poised to emerge as the economic backbone of Euro-Asian commerce, linking regional and global markets in new ways. There will be open competition between the hubs that emerge, but only a few will achieve five-star hub status.

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This means that we are likely to witness soon the creation of the aforementioned hub network and the selection of strategic hubs across the Silk Road region and beyond. We know the Chinese government is already planning to develop more than 200 domestic hubs; they are likely to be linked to global hub networks across the world. The European Union is also upping its game, as is Russia, which makes it likely that the United States, India, Pakistan, and Turkey will not be far behind.

The critical question here is how much will these developments benefit the economies and peoples of the Silk Road region itself? The answer will depend in large part on the policies and strategies adopted by their respective governments, working closely with the major powers and other partners.

Azerbaijan's Hub Strategy

Today, we are on the threshold of emerging twenty-first century hubs that will reactivate the underused potential for land-based trade between Europe and Asia. Giving new life to the ancient land-based Silk Road can only raise the profiles of Azerbaijan and its new Port of Baku. The country's strategic location at the crossroads of major Eurasian land and air transport corridors is entrenching its status as a vital Silk Road region trade and logistics hub.

In Beijing in April 2019, the second Belt and Road Forum heard Azerbaijan's president, Ilham Aliyev, state that

> the creation of modern transportation infrastructure is one of the priorities of Azerbaijan. Using our geographical location, we invest in building bridges between Asia and Europe [...]. The Belt and Road Initiative not only creates opportunities in transportation but enhances trade, tourism, people-to-people contacts, [and] serves the cause of stability and security and peace in Eurasia.

Over the past thirty years, Azerbaijan has used its vast oil and gas resources to modernize its transport and logistics infrastructure, including road, rail, ports, and airports. Its strategic "hub vision" for economic diversification has stimulated thinking about a common vision for this part of the world: the restoration of the Silk Road region as one of the world's great geographies of commerce.

Port of Baku is the oldest and amongst the largest ports in the Caspian Sea, close to huge markets in the EU, Turkey, Iran, Russia, and China. For centuries a key maritime gateway between East and West, today's port is already a transit bridge between Europe and Asia. It aims to become something more, however: a keystone five-star hub of the Silk Road region—a dynamic center of distribution and added value in the heart of Eurasia.

Due to the limited expansion capacity of the old port located in downtown Baku, in 2007 the Azerbaijani government decided to move the port to a new location near Alat, a township 70 km south of the city, at the junction of flagship east-west and north-south connectivity corridors. Its 400 hectares are in the midst of rapid, phased development. With the first phase having been completed in May 2018, the port became the

region's largest transshipment and multi-purpose port, with an annual throughput capacity of 15 million tons of freight and 100,000 TEU. Its operational capacity is expected to reach 25 million tons and 500,000 TEU, based on future expansion plans.

Port of Baku is also the launch pad for the new Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway, which links Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey with the geography of Europe. In operation since October 2017, it connects China and Central Asia with Turkey, the European Union, and the Mediterranean (via Mersin Port). In fact, Port of Baku and BTK are effectively indispensable components of anyone's strategy to develop a transportation corridor connecting Asia with Europe.

Like the Silk Road region's megacities of old, Port of Baku will add value to cargo shipments between Europe and Asia and become a major destination for international business seeking a regional headquarters in Eurasia. Some 130 million people live within 1,000 km of Port of Baku—all potential customers of companies and businesses that would set up shop in Azerbaijan. To facilitate this, in May 2018 the Milli Majlis (parliament) adopted a law providing special tax and customs incentives for future businesses operating in the free economic zone (FEZ) in and around Port of Baku. In the same year, the president signed a decree that addressed the establishment of the FEZ's authorized body and its operational frames and responsibilities. All this was done to stimulate growth in Azerbaijan's non-oil economy and create a lucrative, stable, and protected climate for new sources of foreign direct investment.

To respond to those strategic developments, Port of Baku itself initiated large-scale reforms. By 2025, the port plans to become a mainly landlord port. It will work with leading multinationals to develop fertilizer and grain terminals, develop its holistic digital Port Community System, and build news terminals to accommodate container, intermodal, and bulk liquid traffic, as well as other facilities required for a twenty-first-century port to thrive.

Port of Baku will also continue to develop cross-border cooperation with various parties, including the EU, to enhance the operational effectiveness of its new facility. The EU, for instance, has provided technical assistance that has enabled the port to compete in a very competitive international and regional environment through various expert missions and workshops run under the auspices of the Technical Assistance and Information Exchange (TAIEX) instrument of the European Commission. It has also been the recipient of several EuropeAID-funded projects that supported the enhancement of the new port's operational and human resources capabilities.

Moreover, the port has been active in securing agreements with major European interests to strengthen and expand freight traffic from Europe to the Silk Road region and beyond via the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route. Its partnership with Austria's ÖBB Rail Cargo Group and the Dutch Cabooter Group—formalized in November 2019—is but the latest example of strategic efforts to expand a critical East-West transport corridor from Europe's busiest logistics hubs in The Netherlands and Germany to Turkey, Azerbaijan, Central Asia, and ultimately China.

At the same time, Port of Baku has become a pioneer in implementing best practices related to health, safety, and environmental standards. In September 2017, it was awarded OHSAS 18001:2007 Occupational Health and Safety Management Certification. This was followed in December 2018 by the acquisition of an ISO 14001:2015 Environmental Management Certificate as well as an ISO 9001:2015 Quality Management System Standard certificate in January 2019. This policy went hand in hand with a strategy to help implement the UN Sustainable Development Goals—in particular SDG7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), and SDG17 (Global Partnerships). The conscious choice to adopt cutting-edge technologies—particularly with regards to energy use, waste management, air quality, digitalization, and automation—has been supported and recognized at the European level. As result of these efforts, in October 2019, Port of Baku became the first port in the Caspian basin to be recognized as a "Green Port" by the European Sea Ports Organization.

Lastly, Port of Baku has been working with the OSCE to launch a forward-looking project entitled "Promoting Green Ports and Connectivity in the Caspian Sea Region." Implementation began in June 2019 and this first-of-its-kind regional endeavor has already begun exploring ways in which optimal use of renewable energy, digitalization, and trade and transport facilitation can be made to promote sustainable connectivity.

In short, anticipated developments will make Azerbaijan an ideal place for cargo traffic between

Europe and Asia, and the development model offered by Azerbaijan and Port of Baku echoes the five-star hubs of the ancient Silk Road: the goal being not to just buy and sell, but to add value, innovate, and develop the local economy and society.

New Synergies

The countries of the Silk Road region are building new synergies to secure their respective places in the globalized economic and political arenas of the future by renewing and reworking the ancient Silk Road that once connected Europe and Asia. Azerbaijan will continue to be a key regional actor in shaping the region's transformative vision.

The country's hub strategy envisages an integrated, cohesive, and efficient multimodal project of supply chain and logistics hubs within its borders and abroad. This vision is likely to be emulated elsewhere in the Silk Road geography as the transformational changes initiated by the various connectivity plans, strategies, and initiatives of the region's partners begin to be seen and felt on the ground.

The first two phases of the country's hub strategy have been already completed. Between 2007 and 2015, Azerbaijan built and renewed major infrastructure: highways, railways, ports, and airports. Since 2015, the focus has been on integrating the country's infrastructure with neighbors like Georgia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Turkey, Russia, and Iran. By 2030, Azerbaijan will fully become five-star hub, thus renewing its historical position as a keystone commercial center of the Silk Road region.

The legacy of the era personified by the example of Biruni both reminds us of the golden age of the Silk Road region and can presently serve as a signpost of the strategic opportunities on offer in our current era. In the past, hubs served as the backbone of a robust and interconnected network promoting connectivity, open-mindedness, and innovation. Global trends indicate a similar set of circumstances are now ripe again: working in tandem with partners, the Silk Road region can accomplish in the time ahead a hoped-for restoration of wealth and prosperity to a geography emerging once again onto the world stage. Port of Baku and other potential one-, three-, and five-star hubs will need to play supporting roles in the modern-day endeavor to bring back economic, intellectual, and cultural flourishing to this part of the world, predicated on the unimpeded flow of goods, services, people, arts, technology, and ideas. BD

Eurasia, the Hegemon, and the Three Sovereigns

Pepe Escobar

It is my contention that there are essentially four truly sovereign states in the world today, at least amongst the major powers: the United States, the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, and the Islamic Republic of Iran. These four sovereigns—I call them the Hegemon and the Three Sovereigns—stand at the vanguard of the ultra-postmodern world, characterized by the supremacy of data algorithms and techno-financialization ruling over politics.

It so happens that these Three Sovereigns constitute the three key nodes of Eurasian integration and the top three existential "threats" to the Hegemon, according to the U.S. National Security Strategy. The story of the young twenty-first century will continue to revolve around the clash between the United States—joined by its NATO subsidiary—and these three independent Eurasian powers. It is imperative therefore for the core states that make up the Silk Road region to grasp the strategic conceptual trends that stand behind the geopolitical interplay taking place in a part of the world people like Zbigniew Brzezinski rightly called the "world's axial supercontinent."

Against all odds, the Silk Road region has managed to become, notwithstanding the few obvious exceptions, a bastion of stability in an increasingly vacillating and unpredictable world. In the coming period, regional leaders will need to figure out how to build upon this foundation of stability to create a region defined by the sort of dynamism that reinforced the stability that serves as the basis of the entire construction. They will have to do so in the context of an ongoing data revolution that is reconceptualizing the understanding of sovereignty.

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So it is with this introduction that I would ask readers to imagine this admitedly unorthodox headline: "Michel Foucault to the rescue: where shall we find the real Sovereign, now?" To unpack this mysterious phrase we will need to turn to a number of other contemporary thinkers and concepts, many of which may be unfamiliar. Please bear with me.

Against all odds, the Silk Road region has managed to become, notwithstanding the few obvious exceptions, a bastion of stability in an increasingly vacillating and unpredictable world.

The most influential philosopher currently writing in the German language—who happens to be a South Korean by birth—is Byung-Chul Han. He has recently been making the argument that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic may very well lead to a redefinition of the concept of sovereignty (in his words: "the sovereign is the one who resorts to data").

With this in mind, let us attempt to mix this insight with what may constitute the three major interlocking issues further on down the rocky road of twenty-first-century geopolitics: the appalling management of the COVID-19 crisis; the possible emergence of a new paradigm; and the overall reconfiguration of the international system.

A useful starting point may be to explore some of the ideas contained in the book *Necropolitics* (2019) by Achille Mbembe, a Sorbonne-educated Cameroonian philosopher and political theorist. The book theorizes the genealogy of the contemporary world, a world plagued by ever-increasing inequality, militarization, and enmity, as by a resurgence of retrograde forces determined to exclude and subjugate progressive attempts to build a more equitable and just world. One of the main trusts of the book is Mbembe's attempt to pierce far beyond sovereignty as interpreted in conventional political science and predominant international relations narratives.

Mbembe revisits Michel Foucault's famous lectures delivered at the College de France in 1975-1976, in which he conceptualized biopower as the domain of life over which power has absolute control. Foucault himself defined biopower as "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the

subjugation of bodies and the control of populations." On this basis, Mbembe develops the relation of biopower with sovereignty—*Imperium*—and the state of exception, as conceptualized by Giorgio Agamben. Mbembe tells us that, "the ultimate expression of sovereignty is the production of general norms by a body (the *demos*) comprising free and equal individuals." Then these individuals are considered as full subjects capable of self-understanding, self-consciousness, and self-representation.

Thus politics is defined as a project of autonomy and as the process of reaching an agreement within a collective, through communication and recognition. The problem is that in ultra-postmodernity, this whole project has been shattered. Relations have been debased to a permanent state of Hybrid War.

Late modernity revolved around a paradigm whereby reason is the truth of the subject and politics is the exercise of reason in the public sphere. And that exercise of reason corresponds to the exercise of freedom—a key element for individual autonomy.

Mbembe wistfully evokes the "romance of sovereignty" that rests on the belief that the subject is both master and controlling author of his own meaning. Exercising sovereignty is about society's capacity for self-creation with recourse to institutions inspired by specific social and imaginary significations, as Cornelius Castoriadis reminded us in *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1975). But, in fact, sovereignty is above all defined as the right to kill in defiance of international law. This has become a characteristic of the various expeditionary adventures conducted around the world for decades by the Hegemon.

Foucault's notion of biopower must be freshly examined in the myriad declinations of the state of exception and the state of siege. Biopower in Foucault divides people into those allowed to live and those who must die. Now biopower is applied in much more subtle ways—especially through economic sanctions capable of provoking slow death.

Control presupposes a distribution of human species into groups, a subdivision of the population into subgroups, and the establishment of a biological divide between these subgroups. Foucault used to relate the whole process to racism—a concept that was not simply based on the color of one's skin, as in the black/white dichotomy, but one that took into account all sorts of racial and ethnic gradations presupposing Western hegemony.

Now, Mbembe stresses how "racial thinking more than class thinking (where class is an operator defining history as an economic struggle between classes) has been the ever-present shadow hovering over Western political thought and practice, especially when the point was to contrive the inhumanity of foreign peoples and the sort of domination to be exercised over them." For Foucault, racism is above all a *technology* allowing the exercise of biopower. In the economy of biopower, the function of racism is to regulate the distribution of death and to enable the state's killing machine. It goes without saying that this biopower mechanism is inbuilt in the functioning of all modern states.

Mbembe reminds us how the material premise of Nazi extermination is to be found in colonial imperialism and in the serialization of technical mechanisms for outing people to death, developed between the industrial revolution—as shown, for instance, in Priya Satia's *Empire of Guns* (2018)—and the First World War. That's how the working classes and the "stateless people" of the industrial world found their equivalent in the "savages" or "barbarians" of the colonial world.

There is no question that an adequate historical narrative of the rise of modern terror—and modern terror in slow motion—needs to address the legacy of slavery, one of the first instances of biopolitical experimentation. As Mbembe stresses, the structure of the plantation system—and its dire consequences—express the paradoxical figure of the state of exception. The slave condition includes loss of home, loss of rights over his/her body, and loss of political status. Think of Nagorno-Karabakh ("Artsakh is Armenia, and that's it") or Palestine, for that matter ("there are no Palestinians"). Loss is equal to absolute domination, alienation and social death—as in de facto expulsion from humanity. The colony—and the apartheid system—operates a synthesis between massacre and bureaucracy, that "incarnation of Western rationality" as noted by Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951).

The point is that the technologies that produced Nazism have a strong affinity to those that resulted in the plantation and the colony. And as Foucault showed, Nazism and Stalinism only amplified a series of already existing mechanisms of Western European social and political formation: subjugation of the body, health regulations, social Darwinism, eugenics, medico-legal theories on heredity, degeneration, and race.

The colony thus represents a place in which sovereignty fundamentally consists in exercising a power outside the law and in which "peace" assumes the face of Endless War. Not by accident did the Pentagon reinvented the concept—the terminology used was "the long war"—immediately after 9/11. This ties in with the definition of sovereignty by Carl Schmitt in the early twentieth century: the "power to decide the state of exception." Think of the Hegemon's hot wars (Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya) and proxy wars (Syria, Yemen).

Late modern colonial occupation is a disciplinary, biopolitical, and necropolitical mix. Mbembe concludes that the "most accomplished form of necropower" is the neo-colonial occupation of Palestine, featuring no continuity between ground and the sky; drones crammed with sensors; aerial reconnaissance jets; early warning Hawkeye procedures; assault helicopters; satellites; techniques of hologrammatization; medieval siege warfare adapted to the networked sprawl of urban refugee camps and systematic bulldozing.

Obviously, there are other necropower examples, as well. Zygmunt Bauman noted already in the 2000s that the wars of globalization are not about conquest, acquisition, and takeover of territory. Mbembe stresses they are, "ideally, hit-and-run affairs," manifestations of which have been seen recently in parts of the Silk Road region.

What is emerging alongside conventional armies—NATO in Afghanistan surrounded by a maze of contractors, for instance—are "war machines," as in a corporate bastardization of the concept elaborated in the 1980 book *A Thousand Plateaus* by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. This metamorphosis defines, for instance, the mini-galaxy of "moderate rebels" in Syria. They borrow from regular armies and incorporate new elements adapted to the principle of segmentation and deterritorialization—a mix between a political organization and a mercantile enterprise, operating through capture and depredation.

Mbembe shows how necropolitics is reconfiguring the relations between resistance (think the Axis of Resistance: Iran, Iraq, Syria, Hezbollah), sacrifice (as in fighting ISIS/Daesh jihadi fanaticism), and terror (as applied by strands of "moderate rebels"). The Hegemon, for its part, continues to practice Necropower—as in deploying weapons in the interest of maximally destroying people's living conditions and creating what Mbembe defines as "death-worlds," namely unique forms of social existence in which vast populations have the status of living dead.

Byung Chul-Han takes the conceptual consequences of Mbembe's analysis one step beyond. Necropower is the least of our problems when the whole Kantian world—predicated on a faith that humanity, as a free and autonomous subject, shapes the formative and legislative instance of knowledge—is dead.

The new emerging paradigm is the product of a Copernican anthropological turn. Data is the New Sovereign. Man has abdicated the role of producer of knowledge to the profit of data. Data-ism thus finishes off whatever lineaments of idealism and humanism had characterized the Enlightenment. Knowledge is now produced by a binary (war) machine—and that, of course, applies to Necropower as well. Man himself has been reduced to a mere and calculable accumulation of data.

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The consequence is inevitable: total communication coincides with total vigilance. We have entered the realm of what may be called "Discipline and Punish 2.0." Our whole reality—or, to evoke the late Jean Baudrillard, our whole simulacra—is subjected to the logic of non-stop for-profit production taking place under relentless pressure.

Algorithms are capable of numerization yet are incapable of producing a narrative. To think is way more substantive than to merely calculate. In other words, there is an erotic aspect to thinking, which traces its roots back to classical Greek philosophy: remember "Eros, the most ancient God according to Parmenides," to quote Martin Heidegger. Deep down, to exercise free thinking is to play, as Georges Bataille used to say. "We are all players," Baudrillard stressed, "in ardent wait for those occasionally rational chains to dissipate." To think is essentially subversive. Calculus is erotic and rectilinear; thinking implies a sinuous trajectory: *Homo ludens*. Thus Byung Chul-Han's formulation: from Myth to Data, real, critical, creative thinking totally lost its playful element.

And so we come to the COVID-19 pandemic. Here it would be helpful to refer to the writings of Giorgio Agamben, who did in fact square the circle: it's not that citizens across the West have the right to health safety, he has written, it's the fact that now they have been juridically *forced* to be

healthy. And that, in a nutshell, is what biosecurity—a data process—is all about.

Obviously, there are conventional advantages to biosecurity. Nonetheless—and equally obviously—we cannot escape the fact that biosecurity is an ultra-efficient governance paradigm. Citizens have had it imposed with virtually no political debate whatsoever. The enforcement, as Agamben has noted, killed "any political activity and any social relation as the maximum example of civic participation [in the West]."

That is how the West came to experience social distancing as an entirely new, unprecedented political model—with a (flawed) digital matrix replacing human interaction, which by definition from now on will be regarded as fundamentally suspicious and politically "contagious."

Agamben had to be appalled by this "concept for the destiny of human society that in many aspects seems to have borrowed from religions in decline the apocalyptic idea of the end of the world." In ultra-postmodernity, economics had already replaced politics—as in everything subjected to the diktats of financial capitalism. Now the economy is being absorbed by "the new biosecurity paradigm to which every other imperative must be sacrificed."

Nassim Taleb's concept of "antifragile," elaborated in a 2012 book of the same name, might be helpful here. "Antifragility is beyond resilience or robustness. The resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the antifragile gets better," he writes. "This property is behind everything that has changed with time: evolution, culture, ideas, revolutions, political systems, technological innovation, cultural and economic success, corporate survival, [...] even our own existence as a species on this planet." The classic example of something antifragile is Hydra, the Greek mythological creature that has numerous heads. When one is cut off, two grow back in its place.

As he explains, "Antifragile is the antidote to Black Swans." The modern world may increase technical knowledge, but it will also make things more fragile. "Black Swans hijack our brains, making us feel we 'sort of' or 'almost' predicted them, because they are retrospectively explainable. We don't realize the role of these Swans in life because of this illusion of predictability." The potency of randomness is underestimated: "when we see it, we fear it and overreact. Because of this fear and thirst for order, some human systems, by disrupting the invisible or not so visible logic of things, tend to be exposed to harm from Black Swans and almost never get any benefit." The central point of the Black Swan problem, Taleb says, "is that the odds of rare events are simply not computable."

Yet COVID-19 was a Black Swan, but only of a sort: after all, deciding elites knew for quite some time that something like it was inevitably coming—even as mediocre Western politicians were caught totally unprepared.

Antifragile might lead, optimistically, to a reduction in fragility and greater robustness. Yet there is no evidence, so far, that a "reduction in fragility" within the framework of the current international system, such as it is, will invariably lead towards "greater robustness." In fact, the international system has never been so fragile as it is presently. What we do have is plenty of indications that the system collapse is being refitted, at breakneck speed, as digital neo-feudalism. To repeat: we are witnessing the onset of data as the New Sovereign.

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Asian-wide collectivist spirit and discipline in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic—especially in Confucianist-influenced societies—has worked irrespective of the political system within which the countries in question are organized. But the key point is not that Asian disciplinary society might be seen as a model for the West. We already live in a digital global Panopticum—a sort of Foucault-on-steroids situation. Social network vigilance—and censorship—deployed by the Silicon Valley behemoths has already been internalized. All our data as citizens is trafficked and instantly marketized for private profit. So digital neo-feudalism was already in effect even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In previous writings I had called it "surveillance turbo-neoliberalism" in which there is no inbuilt "freedom" in the Western sense and everything is accomplished by voluntary servitude. Biopolitical surveillance is just a further layer in the whole process—the final frontier, so to speak—because now, as Foucault taught us, this paradigm controls our own bodies. "Liberalism" has been reduced to road kill a long time ago. The point is not that China may eventually become the model for the West but rather that the West may have been set up for an endless biopolitical quarantine without people even noticing it.

In realpolitik terms, the post-lockdown turbo-capitalist framework points to a calcification of the

sort of illiberalism privileged by the one percent in the West, coupled with naked turbo-financialization boosted by the reinforced exploitation of an exhausted and now increasingly unemployed workforce.

Throughout the pandemic, the plutocrats at the helm of hegemonic capital interests—well-equipped to coopt and even sabotage anything that threatens their standing—have not stood on the sides. Consider the long planned World Economic Forum's initiative, scheduled to take place in January 2021, called The Great Reset. According to the World Economic Forum, it is defined as a "commitment to jointly and urgently build the foundations of our economic and social system for a more fair, sustainable and resilient future."

This "reset" is meant to elaborate a "new social contract centered on human dignity, social justice and where societal progress does not fall behind economic development" by "connecting key global governmental and business leaders in Davos with a global multistakeholder network in 400 cities around the world for a forward-oriented dialogue driven by the younger generation."

So the planet may rest in peace: Davos Man will push the button, and a Brave New World will enlighten us all.

But let us come back to the real world. Apart from the Hegemon, arguably there are only three real Sovereigns left in ultra-postmodernity: Russia, China and Iran. NATO members are not more than unevenly glorified vassals, as U.S. President Donald Trump has ironically made rather evident in various public statements.

The planet may rest in peace: Davos Man will push the button, and a Brave New World will enlighten us all.

To repeat: these Three Sovereigns happen to constitute, simultaneously, the three key nodes of Eurasia integration and are defined as constituting the top three existential "threats" to the Hegemon, according to the U.S. National Security Strategy. The story of the young twenty-first century will continue to revolve around the clash between the Hegemon and Eurasia's three independent major powers.

At his June 2020 Moscow Parade speech celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of the allied victory in Second World War, Vladimir Putin, while stressing "friendship and trust between nations" and the necessity to achieve a "common reliable security system," made it clear that the Western neoliberal system is facing the worst financial meltdown in recorded history. He underscored the point that a new international system will, by necessity, have to be brought online. Otherwise, he noted, the world will be facing the imposition of a de facto hybrid neo-fascist "solution."

Russia, China, and Iran are not intended to become constitutive elements of the Davos "Great Reset." As it stands, Moscow and Beijing are more like playing "dragon in the fog"—a delightful Chinese concept evoked by former Kremlin adviser Alexey Chesnakov according to which a strong player, in a complex space, is able to strike at his competitors at any moment from an unexpected angle.

The story of the young twenty-first century will continue to revolve around the clash between the Hegemon and Eurasia's three independent major powers.

This is the key takeaway from the lengthy telephone conversation held between Putin and Xi Jinping in mid-July in which they discussed virtually all aspects of the evolving Russo-Chinese strategic partnership—a conversation that took place against the background of Russia's constitutional referendum and the announcement of the new national security law in Hong Kong. According to the official Chinese readout of the call, Xi referred explicitly to "external sabotage and intervention" in his discussion with Putin.

As much as "external sabotage and intervention" is bound to reach fever pitch, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), complete with all its various branches and derivations—polar, space, health, information, and so on—will continue to be deployed as the Chinese roadmap for the twenty-first century, which has seen partnerships established with virtually all the countries of the Silk Road region, as well as many, many more.

In parallel with BRI, Russia is advancing the Eurasia Economic Union (EAEU) as well as its own New Silk Road vectors focused on Arctic development, space exploration, biospheric engineering, and fusion power. BRI and EAEU are in a process of congruence and achieving, slowly but surely, some sort of merger. For instance, the development of the Russian Far East is one of the great projects of the twenty-first century, which is conceived to be achieved in

partnership with China, Japan, South Korea, and India.

The interpolation of BRI and EAEU is an open system, based on a set of principles, with a special place for "win-win" partnerships in trade, economics, and politics. The Western equivalent would be the Westphalian system that established modern nation-states in 1648. The Peace of Westphalia is in fact an open system that enshrined the concept of state sovereignty into international law, and that centuries later was set in stone by the United Nations Charter. It is a "win-win" partnership in the sense that every state, whatever its size and economic importance, has an equal right to sovereignty. So any rumblings by Western oligarchies hinting at a post-Westphalian system—something that was somewhat advanced in the past several decades by humanitarian imperialist interventions of the Kosovo and Libya kind—in fact constitute a threat to what until recently was established as a moderate, best-of-possible-worlds level playing field.

On the "external sabotage and intervention" front, China seems to be overtaking Russia as a primary focus of American (and to a much lesser extend European) opprobrium. Virtually every move seems to be converging towards provoking a fragmentation of China, with the intention of atrophying it geopolitically to a level, in the wild dreams of some Western policymakers, comparable to the "century of humiliation."

Yan Xuetong, Dean of the Institute of International Relations at Tsinghua University, recently argued that Cold War 2.0, unlike the original Cold War, will be essentially a technological competition. As a direct hot war is unthinkable, considering the inevitability of nuclear escalation, myriad forms of Hybrid War, some already in effect, will proliferate.

That, in itself, will be already crystallizing the onset of a "post-Westphalian" scenario, with scores of nation states dragged into a decoupling scenario and forced to take sides. Reference models will vanish. Xenophobia and hyper-nationalism with fascistic traits will prevail. International law—already thrown in the dustbin of history with the onset, ironically, of the doctrine of the end of history by the Hegemon around the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall—will be rendered meaningless.

For at least a few decades the Hegemon, based on its global military reach, was able to offer a geopolitical and geoeconomic framework in which at least some selected players enjoyed political and economic benefits. China—in terms of trade and investment—was one of them.

But since Xi's 2013 announcement establishing the vision of BRI as a matchless roadmap for globalization 2.0—in fact, as the only credible game in town—the process of decoupling became all but inevitable.

BRI is the embryo of a transformation of the international system—a soft reinvention of capitalism. What Putin had proposed at the Munich Security Conference in the 2000s (unsuccessfully, it turned out) was re-packaged and re-proposed by Xi in the 2010s. This time, what was on offer quickly found an audience in vast parts of not only the Silk Road region but also amongst the members of the Non-aligned Movement and other parts of the Global South (not to mention member states of the European Union), as it emphasized China's civilizational discipline and ability to independently innovate.

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It is as if in a post-Planet Lockdown environment, the world may need to keep pace with China or risk getting left in the dust. With this we may turn for a moment to Iran.

The case of Iran is extremely complex—not least because of the delicate political balancing inbuilt in a unique Shia theo-democracy. Even facing the Hegemon's relentless "maximum pressure," Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has managed to regiment society by drawing on the formidable Shia ethic of resistance. As a priceless geostrategic prize, and confronted not only by the Hegemon but also Israel and assorted Arab regimes, Iran has at least managed to improve relations with key neighbors (and important New Silk Road actors) Turkey and Pakistan.

Yet the game-changers are really Russia and China. The Three Sovereigns, slowly but surely, are on their way to harmonize their different payment systems; the possibility is open for these to eventually merge in the near future, bypassing the U.S. dollar. After the end of the Iran nuclear deal-related UN sanctions this year, Iran may be admitted as a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The recently announced 25-year strategic partnership with China, which covers multiple fields, solidifies Iran as a key New Silk Road

node and enhances China's national security in the context of securing yet another reliable energy provider.

What should lie ahead is an enhanced Turkey-Iran-Pakistan partnership, interlinked with the SCO agenda, advancing the integration of West Asia with South Asia in which Iran plays the double role of energy provider and key transit route. As much as investing in connectivity with the Arab world—the Iran-Iraq-Syria-Lebanon road and rail axis—Tehran should also advance the same connectivity role with Central Asia, via the Caspian Sea and also overland to Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. All of this should be conducted in strictly pragmatic terms, which implies toning down what remains of Islamic revolutionary rhetoric.

Largely self-sufficient, even under harsh sanctions, with a well-educated young population and profiting from excellent technical knowledge, Iran is ideally positioned to revive the role it played along the Silk Road in ancient times. A political, economic, diplomatic, military, and connectivity alliance of the Three Sovereigns is the essential building block of Eurasia integration. Build it, and they will come.

Asia is now one step beyond conceptualizing and embarking on a full-on implementation of economic uplift for the whole of Eurasia, with an African extension.

As the Silk Road region, in particular, invests in its integration, the EU fragments. Germany, even if not a Sovereign but a de facto NATO vassal, may eventually assert its regional hegemony by crushing even more the illusions of the mini-sovereigns—as in the eurozone, where the minis are absolutely impotent to determine economic policies in accordance with their national interest.

In the event that Europe, crippled by north-south and east-west internal corrosion, is prevented from profiting from its status as the largest economic block in the world, it will be inexorably reduced to no more than an inconsequent Far Western Asia. Revenge of History redux, one could say.

As it stands, the mostly American playbook has featured sanctions and trade wars—especially against the Three Sovereigns. It is misguided to qualify it as the advent of a new illiberal order. Russia and China—and to a certain extent Iran—were asking for a rethink of the post-1945 (and post-1989) international system, alongside others like Turkey. They were flatly rebuked. That only served to accelerate the logical flow of history—which is the progressive integration of the "heartland," in H.J. Mackinder's formulation.

It was the Hegemon that in fact acted as an illiberal power—when we observe how trade wars and sanctions are now configured as the new normal, directed at entire populations of nations arbitrarily deemed as enemies (e.g. Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Yemen). Necropower is inbuilt in the era of Total Economic War.

What should lie ahead is an enhanced Turkey-Iran-Pakistan partnership in which Iran plays the double role of energy provider and key transit route.

A not entirely unimportant corollary to this is the fact that there is no evidence that UN Security Council reform will be allowed by the five permanent members. Yet the real gap is not between the UN nuclear club and the rest, considering the nuclear capabilities of India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Israel. The real gap is between the Three Sovereigns—Russia, China, and Iran—and a Hegemon still conditioned by the logic of perpetual war and the refusal to admit the "unipolar moment" has come and gone. In this lies the heart of Cold War 2.0.

Mbembe concisely encapsulated the drama of the young twenty-first century as the "extreme fragility of all. And of the All." With necropower and data-as-sovereign tightening its grip, what passes now for "democracy" in the West is being reduced to a hollowed out shell, unpredictable, paranoid, corroded by the marriage of manufactured consent and political correctness, devoid of substantive meaning and increasingly lacking in justification: a mere (and increasingly outdated) ornament. As the countries of the Silk Road region continue to invest in various integration strategies to ensure the heartland become a geopolitical player in its own right, they would be wise to keep in mind the rebalancing taking place between the Hegemon and the Three Sovereigns in the context of the construction of our ultra-postmodern world. BD

Silk Road Pathways

The China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor

Yu Hongjun

Since the outbreak of 2008 world financial crisis, issues such as lackluster economic growth around the world and lack of progress in regional cooperation have not been resolved. Conservatism, isolationism, racism, populism, and unilateralism are on the march; political and social movements based on opposition to economic globalization are in vogue; and policymakers as much as ordinary people are expressing concern about the future of the world. Based on his observations and thoughts with regards to modern international relations, as well as his commitment towards a common destiny for mankind, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the launch of the Silk Road Economic Belt and Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road, which together form the globally influential Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Since this proposal was made in autumn 2013, the international community's broad participation in the Belt and Road Initiative has demonstrated that BRI is more than just a new measure for China to develop domestic and international markets, or even a signpost for how to grow in concert with the world. BRI is also a new model for promoting international cooperation beyond political, social, and geopolitical differences, aiming to achieve deeper congruence of development pathways.

BRI and the South Caucasus

So far, within the broader framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, the China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor has involved both the greatest number of countries and the most complex projects. The South Caucasus has since ancient times been an important node on the Silk Road, connecting various regions. China has immense potential for cooperation with Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia, and we have much to offer in partnership. Every party should improve dialogue and cooperation, and together endeavor to finish work on this corridor.

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The China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor aligns with the developmental interests of all parties and has a broad future prospect. The corridor spans much of the Silk Road region. It starts from China, directly connecting with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, then continues through Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to connect with the rest of West Asia, which naturally includes the South Caucasus.

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There are major differences in the history, religion, level of development, political system, and especially international relations postures among Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia. However, there are also many ties and mutual influences among the three countries that cannot be overlooked. As a result of the region's location between the Black and Caspian Seas, the South Caucasus has broad links with Central Asia, Western Asia, and even the Mediterranean, and complicated relations with Russia, which makes it very geopolitically important and sensitive.

The South Caucasus currently has a total of around 14 million people; thus, the scale of the regional market there is not very large. All three countries have, since regaining independence, experienced various degrees of civil strife and warfare, leading to a significant issue of lagging economic development. They all need to renovate aging infrastructure, modernize public services, and improve welfare systems. This provides a rare historical opportunity for China to combine existing cooperation with the three states into the wider framework of creating the China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor. Fully utilizing the opportunity on offer is not only in the present interest of the South

Caucasus countries, but will also, in the long term, promote peace and stability in the region. An examination of the ties linking each of the three countries to China in general and BRI in particular is thus warranted and will be presented below.

Azerbaijan

Within the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan is the most populous, and generally the strongest country: it has significant economic vitality and is an important member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. As President Heydar Aliyev of Azerbaijan had conceptually proposed a restoration of the historic Great Silk Road as early as September 1998, China's concrete proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 has been warmly welcomed by Azerbaijan. Its status as a founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which actively promotes BRI, is clear evidence for this.

Azerbaijan has always had high praise and extended a warm welcome for Chinese firms that invest in the country.

In December 2015, when President Ilham Aliyev traveled to China on a state visit, the leaders of the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Joint Promotion of the Silk Road Economic Belt. Since then, he has made numerous constructive comments on increasing Sino-Azerbaijani cooperation within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.

In August 2016, during a meeting with the new Chinese ambassador to Baku, Azerbaijan's president reaffirmed the great importance his country places on relations with China, indicating his desire to actively promote comprehensive cooperation between the two countries under the Belt and Road Initiative framework. In January 2019, Aliyev agreed to an interview with Chinese media while at the World Economic Forum in Davos. He again emphasized that BRI is very important for Azerbaijan, that his country fully supports this Chinese initiative, and that it will do everything it can to become an active participant in BRI. In April of the same year, he actively participated in the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in Beijing, and held high level talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping. China and Azerbaijan signed more than ten important documents, on top of many signed previously.

Due to the high level of importance placed on the issue by the heads of state of both countries, Sino-Azerbaijani relations have now moved into practical cooperation on many different sectors, achieving rapid high-quality growth. Azerbaijan's diplomats in China have participated in many expositions across China and worked hard to help firms in both countries find opportunities for cooperation. In November 2018, at the first International Import Expo held in Shanghai, 32 firms from Azerbaijan participated, bringing over 200 products. According to Azerbaijan's State Customs Committee, in the first half of 2019, Sino-Azerbaijani trade reached $1.27 billion. China has become Azerbaijan's fourth largest trading partner, third largest export partner, and fourth largest import partner. While deepening commercial ties, both sides are also promoting cultural exchanges: for instance, Azerbaijan has further simplified its electronic visa procedures, and launched direct flights to Beijing. Chinese tourism to Azerbaijan is growing steadily.

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As a keystone transportation link between Europe and Asia, Azerbaijan places great importance on its regional advantage, trying to create a transportation corridor that spans multiple regions, with both east-west and north-south links. The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad that was inaugurated in October 2017 has great significance for the full implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative in the region. It can greatly expedite travel times for Chinese goods reaching Azerbaijan through Central Asia to make its way onto Europe, and reduced transportation costs will benefit all.

A new international port under construction 70 kilometers from Baku will be a very modernized transportation hub that can annually handle 25 million tons of Caspian Sea trade. A 120-acre free trade zone is also under construction in the port, providing tax-free commerce, streamlined approval processes, and other measures to attract international investors. So far this port has signed memoranda of understanding with China's Jiangsu Lianyungang Port Corporation and China Cosco Container Lines Corporation. We believe that more

and more international firms, especially Chinese firms, will make investments in this new port.

Azerbaijan has always had high praise and extended a warm welcome for Chinese firms that invest in the country, recognizing their participation in many industries and facilitating the completion of projects in accordance with contracts. In September 2019, during a meeting with the visiting Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress Li Zhanshu, Aliyev said that both sides have achieved good results in the advancement of cooperation in the energy, transportation, and cultural sectors. Both sides also confirmed that Azerbaijan's success in completing modern infrastructure capable of transporting Chinese goods to international markets is a successful example of cooperation in the field of transportation.

The World Economic Forum's 2019 Global Competitiveness Report ranked Azerbaijan 31st in transportation infrastructure, 11th in efficiency of train services, 12th in airport connectivity, 25th in efficiency of seaport services, and 27th in quality of road infrastructure. These impressive results show that Azerbaijan's business environment and international cooperation is constantly improving. We believe that, as Azerbaijan's investment, business, and legal environment continues to improve, Sino-Azerbaijani cooperation under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative will grow even further.

Georgia

Georgia has a population of around 4 million, with an area of some 70,000 square kilometers, is an Eastern Orthodox country in possession of a unique historical tradition, development pathway, governance system, and political and economic relationships internationally. However, this country has suffered through extended periods of warfare and civil strife since regaining its independence, with the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia remaining in a de facto state of separation. The state of conflict between Russia and Georgia has still not been resolved, while challenges in the realm of infrastructure and economic development also remain salient. Experts have pointed out that, perhaps as a result of its situation, Tbilisi had not initially paid special attention to the strategic potential of the Belt and Road Initiative, while Beijing had likewise failed to notice the unique role Georgia could play in the China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor.

On the other hand, the country's leaders have consistently expressed a desire to revive the ancient Silk Road in order to develop international ties and promote economic development since Georgia renewed its independence. Former President Eduard Shevardnadze had proposed a "new Silk Road" multiple times. He believed that this idea was not just a fancy catchphrase but that it could instead become a multilateral coordinated effort based on mutual respect and equality—and that its actualization would contribute to Georgia's security and prosperity.

One of Shevardnadze's successors, Mikheil Saakashvili, also said that Georgia should continue to attach great importance to the revival of the Silk Road. Because various Georgian leaders have shown great enthusiasm in developing ties with China, Sino-Georgian ties in various sectors had already begun to grow before the initiation of the Belt and Road Initiative. Both sides' cooperation in infrastructure projects have stepped up in the current century. For instance, China's Sichuan Electric Power Import & Export Corporation built the Khadori hydro power plant, which was inaugurated in 2004.

Since China proposed the Belt and Road Initiative in autumn 2013, new opportunities for cooperation between China and Georgia have arisen. In August 2014, when a delegation of Chinese media covering the Silk Road region visited Tbilisi, Georgia's then President Giorgi Margvelashvili and Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili gave interviews to Chinese journalists. They both expressed support for BRI and the hope that it would lead to increased ties with China. In October of that year, Garibashvili spoke at an international investment forum in Baku on the importance of reviving the Silk Road, and said that Georgia would be willing to make contributions to this endeavor.

In December 2015, China's first Silk Road-branded cross-border train from Lianyungang arrived in Tbilisi, where Garibashvili personally participated in the welcoming ceremony, commenting that the revival of this ancient transportation route also signaled the return of Georgia's historic mission. He predicted that Georgia would soon become the regional hub connecting Europe, East Asia, India, China, and the Middle East. Prior to this, in February 2015, the arrival to Tbilisi of a cargo train from Xinjiang, Georgia's then deputy prime minister had led officials from relevant departments in hosting a welcoming ceremony. Georgia's enthusiasm for the Belt and Road Initiative and great expectations from bilateral cooperation is evident.

The year 2015 represents an important milestone in Sino-Georgian cooperation under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. Things kicked off in March 2015, when the two sides signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Joint Promotion of the Silk Road Economic Belt, as well as a joint declaration on beginning work on feasibility studies for a trade deal, shortly followed by a memorandum of understanding launching negotiations for free trade agreement. In September 2015, when Garibashvili attended the World Economic Forum's Annual Meeting of the New Champions in Dalian (the so-called "Summer Davos"), he and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang held talks. While discussing various sectors of Chinese society, he said that Georgia is the country that is most welcoming of Chinese investment, firms, people, and culture in the region, and expressed his view that Georgia will become an outstanding partner for China. In October 2015, he further stated at the Tbilisi Silk Road International Forum that Georgia connects the East with the West, North with the South, adding that it hopes to become the regional center node. In 2015, China and Georgia also signed a bilateral local currency swap agreement, enabling the companies of both countries to conduct business using local currency in order to ease trade and investment.

Admittedly, Georgia's market has a limited size, thus Sino-Georgian trade volume is not large. However, China is Georgia's third largest trading partner and fourth largest wine importer, as well as a major investor in Georgia. So far, we do not have the full data for Chinese investment in Georgia, but we know that from 2007 to 2018, the investment total in Georgia of just one Chinese company, Xinjiang Hualing Corporation, exceeded $600 million.

Xinjiang Hualing Corporation entered Georgia more than a decade ago and today remains the largest foreign firm in Georgia. Its investments in Georgia include timber, mining, real estate development, industrial parks, and international economic zones—to name but a few. In 2012, Hualing successfully purchased Georgia's Basisbank, taking an important step forward in developing financial ties in Georgia by Chinese private enterprises. Because of good cooperation and business performance, projects where Hualing has had responsibilities have been rated by Georgia as the best.

Georgia could become the Black Sea base of the Belt and Road Initiative.

In January 2018, the Sino-Georgian free trade agreement formally went into effect. This trade deal is the first that China signed with another country in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. Reactions have been positive across the Silk Road region, not just in the South Caucasus. According to this treaty, Georgia will not apply any tariffs to 96.5 percent of Chinese imports, while China will reciprocate by not applying any tariffs to 93.9 percent of Georgian imports. Partly as a result of this good news, when Hualing Corporation's newly-completed industrial park begun its process of attracting businesses globally, over 70 businesses expressed interest in the first round of inquiry. Georgia had also signed a comprehensive free trade agreement with the European Union. Therefore, many experts believe that Georgia could indeed become a transit hub between China and the European Union, as long as China and Georgia both work hard towards actualizing this goal.

Sino-Georgian cooperation is not just limited to trade, but also extends to infrastructure. In 2016, China Railway Bureau Group 23 successfully completed the T8 tunnel along Georgia's modern railways network. China Tianchen Engineering Corporation also recently completed a 230-megawatt capacity combined cycle power plant—the largest electricity generation plant in Georgia's history.

Due to these and other milestones, some predict that as mutual trust between China and Georgia continues to rise, the trading partnership continues to tighten, and cooperation in every field keeps growing in scope and depth, Georgia could become the Black Sea base of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Armenia

The smallest of the South Caucasus countries, Armenia has a population of 3 million and is a completely landlocked country. Due to a very complicated history between the two, Armenia and Turkey hold deep grudges against each other, while Armenia and Azerbaijan are involved in a thus-far unresolved territorial dispute. Today, Armenia has yet to establish normal diplomatic relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan, causing this country, which is starved of natural resources, to remain relatively poor in terms of economic self-reliance. In 2013, when China proposed the Belt and Road Initiative, Armenia's GDP was only $11.1 billion, with a GDP per capita ranked 113th

globally and fixed capital formation growing negatively at -7.75 percent. However, one area of opportunity lies in its large diaspora in Europe and the Americas, which is mostly relatively wealthy. The role of this diaspora and associated remittances in helping Armenia develop international economic ties and trade is quite clear.

China has had many interactions with Armenia throughout history. Since 1991, when Armenia regained independence, Beijing and Yerevan have maintained a positive posture for developing ties in the political, economic, cultural, and other sectors, as well as gaining a high level of bilateral and multilateral cooperation in international affairs. According to Armenia, from 2010 to 2013, trade between China and Armenia has been around $400 million annually, growing to $588 million in 2014, backsliding to below $500 million in 2015 and 2016. In March 2015, the two countries signed a three-year local currency swap agreement of 1 billion renminbi (or 77 billion dram) in order to further encourage bilateral trade, commerce, and direct investment.

According to China's Ministry of Commerce, as of the end of 2015, the total volume of China's direct investment in Armenia is $7.51 million. Few Chinese firms are present in Armenia: those that are there mostly partake in equipment sales and project contracting. Other than Huawei and ZTE—two Chinese firms which provide telecommunications products and services to Armenia—most other projects are currently in the planning stage. Fortune Oil from Hong Kong SAR had successfully obtained mining rights in Armenia, but due to the persistently low international price of iron ore, was forced to temporarily close its Armenia office in 2018.

Although the trading volume between the two countries has remained stagnant for a number of years and the volume of investment remain negligible, China has maintained for many years the position of Armenia's second-largest trading partner. Armenia continues to consider China an important trading partner. Therefore, Armenia participates in the Belt and Road Initiative with great enthusiasm.

In March 2015, while on a state visit to China, Armenian President Armen Sarkissian signed a declaration on further developing bilateral relations. Building on this, both sides later signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Joint Promotion of the Silk Road Economic Belt. In this document, Armenia expressed its clear stance of wanting to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative. In 2016, Armenia became a dialogue partner in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In March 2017, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank approved Armenia's membership. China and Armenia further extended bilateral dialogue, and have deepened ties in various sectors.

Sarkissian has personally expressed a clear, positive stance on Armenia's participation in the "Belt and Road Initiative." In April 2019, while attending the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in China, he said that Armenia's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative not only consists in cooperation with Chinese firms on developing infrastructure but can also be expanded to the data world, where the sides can create a digital BRI to help make Armenia a digital port to the world.

Sarkissian has personally expressed a clear, positive stance on Armenia's participation in the "Belt and Road Initiative."

In recent years, Armenia's embassy in Beijing has worked hard to build on positive signs in Sino-Armenian cooperation, encouraging Chinese firms and people to find business opportunities in Armenia. So far, Chinese firms are actively participating in the bidding process for the third section of Armenia's "North-South" Highway and a transformer station, and are also conducting feasibility studies on a planned Armenia-Iran Railways project. China and Armenia are also expanding cooperation opportunities in copper mining, cement, glass manufacturing, and other sectors.

We hope that China and Armenia can continue to achieve new milestone in cooperation under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, and that both sides can continue to explore new opportunities for cooperation as part of the China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor, and thus create more tangible results.

Spirit of Perseverance

Building the China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor is a very complex endeavor, requiring continuous work from all parties. As outlined above, the three South Caucasus countries all need to renovate aging infrastructure, modernize public services, and improve welfare systems. This provides a rare historical opportunity for China to combine

existing cooperation with the three nations into the wider framework of creating the aforementioned corridor.

At the same time, we must also recognize that, due to the many challenges to economic development, complicated intra-regional relations, and inadequate connections with the wider world, there is much work to do for China and the South Caucasus countries in creating the China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor. In the first quarter of 2020, due to COVID-19, bilateral trade between China and Armenia fell to $198 million, a clear drop from the same time last year. China's trading relationships with both Azerbaijan and Georgia were similarly affected. Cooperation in other sectors, especially in infrastructure, were hit even harder.

Given this situation, the China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor may not be able to form a comprehensive regional network for some time. China and the South Caucasus countries should not rush to complete the construction of the Belt and Road Initiative. Instead, all parties are expected to work more steadily and maintain a detail-oriented mindset. Ensuring that cooperation leads to win-win situations, as well as maintaining a spirit of perseverance, represents the best path for moving forward cooperation between China and the South Caucasus countries under Belt and Road Initiative, together making progress on creating the China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor. BD

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Completing the Southern Gas Corridor

SGC in a Post-pandemic World

Akhmed Gumbatov

The global spread of the latest zoonotic virus, commonly known as COVID-19, has become an unprecedented calamity for all humankind. By the time this publication goes to press, it is likely that worldwide around 25 million people will have been infected and the number of lives lost will approach the one million mark.

This tragedy has been compounded by another one: the coronavirus pandemic has dramatically demobilized the global economy. In an attempt to curb the further transmission of the virus, many affected countries around the world imposed complete lockdowns of their respective populations, which resulted in severe and extraordinary economic disruption. According to the IMF's most recently updated World Economic Outlook forecast (June 2020), the global economy will shrink by 4.9 percent this year, which represents the worst downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The energy sector has been hit particularly hard. Limitations on transport, trade, and economic activities have led to a staggering drop in energy demand worldwide. In its latest Global Energy Review, the International Energy Agency (IEA) forecasted a 6 percent drop in global energy consumption.

The organization anticipates a decline in demand for all types of energy sources (except for renewables). For instance, the oil industry expects a drop in consumption of 9.3 million barrels a day this year. The collapse in demand for crude has already sparked turmoil in the global oil market, with prices for Brent crude in April dropping to their lowest level in 18 years and WTI crude going negative for the first time in history. Moreover, consumption of coal and natural gas for 2020 is projected to fall by 8 percent and 4 percent, respectively, according to the IEA.

In addition to falling demand, many anticipated energy projects are being canceled or postponed. Global investment in the oil and gas sector is projected to drop by almost one third in 2020. Such gloomy developments in the energy sector have provoked discussions about the potential challenges to the on-time completion of one of the world's largest and most expensive energy infrastructure projects: the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC), a $40 billion 3,500 km-long chain of pipelines aimed at bringing natural gas to Europe from Azerbaijan and the wider Caspian region for the first time ever.

This essay will investigate the impact of COVID-19 on the on-time completion of the Southern Gas Corridor, which appears to remain on track for the end of 2020. It will also consider potential developments regarding the Southern Gas Corridor in a post-COVID-19 world.

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The Southern Gas Corridor

The Southern Gas Corridor is the term used to describe a planned chain of infrastructure projects designed to bring natural gas from the wider Caspian region to European markets. The initiative was proposed by the European Commission in 2008 to diversify the EU's natural gas supply routes and decrease its dependency on supplies from Russia, a country that accounted for more that 40 percent of the EU's total imports of natural gas in 2019.

The strategic importance of finding a steady and reliable alternative source of natural gas is strengthened by the fact that the EU's indigenous production of natural gas is in steady decline. According to the IEA, the EU's domestic production of natural gas will decrease from a total of 128 billion cubic meters (bcm) in 2018 to 65 bcm in 2025. In addition, around 100 bcm of long-term contracts are expected to expire by 2025, thus creating favorable conditions for additional imports from new sources.

The Southern Gas Corridor is the term used to describe a planned chain of infrastructure projects designed to bring natural gas from the wider Caspian region to European markets.

At the initial stage, natural gas for the SGC project will be supplied from Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz Stage 2 field. Discovered in 1999, Shah Deniz is one of the largest gas-condensates fields in the world. It is located on the deep-water shelf of the Caspian Sea, approximately 70 km southeast of Baku. Shah Deniz Stage 1 started operations in 2006 and has the capacity to produce around 10 bcm of natural gas per year. Since then, the field has become an important source of natural gas supplies not only for domestic consumption in Azerbaijan, but also for exports to Georgia and Turkey via the newly-built South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP), also known as the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum Pipeline.

Shah Deniz Stage 2, which began to come online in 2018, will provide an additional 16 bcm of natural gas production per year, with 10 bcm allocated to Europe and 6 bcm to Turkey. The cost of developing the second stage of the Shah Deniz field is $28 billion, making it the most expensive component of the Southern Gas Corridor. BP is the technical operator of the field and its largest shareholder, with 28.8 percent ownership of the joint venture. Other participants include a division of Azerbaijan's state oil company (SOCAR/SGC), with 16.7 percent; Turkey's national oil company (TPAO), with 19 percent; Petronas, with 15.5 percent; Lukoil, with 10 percent; and Naftiran Intertrade Company (NICO), with 10 percent.

Besides the development of the second stage of the Shah Deniz field, other major elements of SGC are the South Caucasus Pipeline Expansion (SCPX) in Azerbaijan and Georgia, the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) in Turkey, and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) in Greece, Albania, and Italy. The South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP) was commissioned in 2006 to supply around 7 bcm of natural gas per year from Shah Deniz Stage 1 to Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey. The pipeline was expanded in 2019 to accommodate an additional 16 bcm of natural gas for the Southern Gas Corridor from Shah Deniz Stage 2, thus increasing the pipeline's capacity to 23 bcm. It could be further expanded to 31 bcm should more gas supplies become available in the future. The shareholder structure of the pipeline project is identical to that of Shah Deniz.

The next major element of SGC is Turkey's TANAP pipeline, which was officially inaugurated in November 2019 and cost $6.5 billion to build. The central and also longest part of the corridor (1850 km), TANAP connects Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz Stage 2 natural gas field to Europe via the SCPX pipeline on the Georgia-Turkey border and the TAP pipeline on the Turkey-Greece border. TANAP can transport 16 bcm of natural gas annually, and similar to SCPX, its capacity can be expanded up to 31 bcm. TANAP's shareholders are the Southern Gas Corridor CJSC, with 51 percent ownership; Turkey's BOTAS, with 30 percent; BP with 12 percent; and SOCAR Turkey, with 7 percent.

The final leg of SGC is the TAP pipeline. Connecting with TANAP on the Turkey-Greece border, TAP crosses Greece, Albania, and the Adriatic Sea before coming ashore in southern Italy to connect to the Italian natural gas network. The TAP project, worth €4.5 billion, faced delays in the past, and current plans are for it to be completed in late 2020. In other words, TAP is the only component of the strategic energy corridor that is still under construction. Once finished, it will begin carrying 10 bcm of natural gas, with 8 bcm for Italy, 1 bcm for Greece, and 1 bcm for Bulgaria via the Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria (IGB). The IGB project, which also experienced delays in the past, is also set to be completed by the end of 2020.

SGC is considered as one of the most strategic projects for the European Union, helping to diversify the bloc's natural gas supplies routes and improve its energy security.

Once additional energy supplies are available in the future, TAP's transporting capacity can be doubled to more than 20 bcm. The realization of the TAP project will not only improve Italy's energy security, but will also promote the country's aspirations of becoming Southern Europe's gas hub. TAP's ownership is held by six companies: BP, SOCAR, and Italy's Snam, each with 20 percent; Belgium's Fluxys, with 19 percent; Spain's Enagás, with 16 percent; and Swiss-headquartered Axpo, with 5 percent.

When complete, the SGC project will comprise 3,500 km of pipelines, with the total value of works for the whole project worth around $40 billion. As noted above, the strategic gas corridor is expected to come online by the end of 2020, when TAP's construction works are completed.

The SGC project represents the first-ever attempt to directly connect natural gas fields located in the Caspian basin with European markets. In this regard, SGC is

considered as one of the most strategic projects for the European Union, helping to diversify the bloc's natural gas supplies routes and improve its energy security. The European Commission has officially recognized both TANAP and TAP as "projects of common interest" (PCI) under the EU's Trans-European energy infrastructure guidelines.

The realization of SGC is great news not only for the EU but also for Azerbaijan's economy, which stands to benefit from increased exports of natural gas, given that the oil and gas sector generates about 40 percent of the country's GDP and 75 percent of government revenue. In addition, the successful execution of a project of such scale, which already involves seven countries and more than a dozen major energy companies, increases Azerbaijan's geopolitical standing. Other participating countries also benefit from transit fees, investments, and new jobs created by the construction and operational activities of the corridor. Should more supplies become available from Azerbaijan and other natural gas producing countries in the region, the corridor's capacity can be doubled, thus further increasing the economic and geopolitical weight of the project. Potential buyers from Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary, Montenegro, and other countries have already expressed their interest in participating in an expanded version of the Southern Gas Corridor in the future.

The COVID-19 Factor

The coronavirus outbreak has had a negative impact on demand for natural gas. In fact, the pandemic has further exacerbated already shrinking gas consumption caused by historically mild temperatures over the first months of 2020. According to the IEA, the natural gas sector will experience a 4 percent decline in 2020—"the largest recorded demand shock" in history. Global natural gas output is also set by drop by 2.6 percent in 2020.

Prior to the pandemic, global natural gas production in 2020 was expected to be 4,233 bcm. Now the indicator has been revised down to 3,962 bcm for this year, rising to 4,015 bcm in 2021 and to 4,094 in 2022. Weak demand accompanied with abundant supplies has led to a collapse in natural gas prices around the world, with European natural gas prices falling by almost 40 percent since the start of 2020. This is not welcoming news for natural gas suppliers participating in the development of the costly Southern Gas Corridor, as their revenues are also expected to decrease.

Moreover, while revenue is shrinking, costs associated with the development of SGC are increasing. One reason is that investors have been forced to adopt costly safety measures to prevent the spread of the virus in the communities engaged in the construction and operational activities of the corridor. Another is that these activities had to continue amid various lockdowns and quarantines, as well as closed borders.

Despite such challenges, COVID-19 has not caused delays in commercial operations at any of the three completed components of the corridor, namely Shah Deniz Stage 2, SCPX, and TANAP. According to both SOCAR and BP reports, all facilities and operations have performed in line with established goals and timeframes. In the first half of 2020, TANAP transported 1.9 bcm of natural gas to Turkey, which accounts for around 37 percent of Azerbaijan's total exports to Turkey for the reporting period (i.e. 5.2 bcm). Remarkably, thanks to the additional export capacity provided by TANAP as well as a dramatic reduction in imports of natural gas from Russia, Azerbaijan has become the largest supplier of natural gas to the Turkish market in the past few months, well ahead of Russia and Iran.

Of particular concern is the fact that the pandemic has imposed particularly significant hurdles on the on-time realization of TAP—the corridor's final leg and the only component which is still under construction. The past few months have seen significant increases in spending caused by the introduction of strict epidemiological safety measures, including limitations on commercial flights. Together with related factors, this has negatively affected the delivery of staff and materials, which has dramatically complicated the construction process.

Nevertheless, the construction of TAP has not stopped, and the project is steadily progressing towards delivering its first gas by the end of 2020. In previous months, significant advances on TAP's right of way (ROW) were made: land was actively cleared and pipeline parts strung, welded, lowered into the trenches, and backfilled. In short, TAP moved further into the project construction phase.

In late May, TAP started to introduce natural gas into a 4 km section of the pipeline in Albania as a test (the first natural gas to be introduced into the Greek section of TAP had taken place in November 2019). Meanwhile, in June, TAP reached another important milestone: the completion

of the 105 km offshore section of the pipeline under the Adriatic Sea. Finally, TAP's last weld was completed in mid-July, meaning that all components of the 878 km-long pipeline has been joined together. As of mid-August 2020, the TAP project was more than 97 percent complete—a 7 percent increase since January 2020 and quite an impressive logistical feat, given the difficulties caused by COVID-19.

Similar to TAP, IGB is also facing significant challenges imposed by lockdown and quarantine measures. Nevertheless, the project is also steadily progressing, and its completion remains scheduled for the end of 2020, in parallel to TAP. Once realized, the 182 km-long pipeline, worth €240 million, will transport Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz Stage 2 natural gas from TAP in Greece to the national gas transmission system in Bulgaria. IGB is a key part of the EU's strategy for greater integration of its internal gas market, which also includes interconnection projects between Bulgaria and Greece, Bulgaria and Romania, and Romania and Hungary.

As of mid-August, SGC remains on schedule. Nevertheless, as COVID-19 still has a potential to negatively impact on the development of the corridor—particularly the TAP portion—the consortium requested a second prolongation of what's called a Third-Party Access (TPA) exemption, providing the possibility of postponing the first delivery of gas until December 2021.

TPA, one of the key pillars of EU internal market regulation, entails a system whereby third parties other than owners and operators of the pipeline can have non-discriminatory access to pipeline transportation services. However, an exemption to this rule may be granted by national regulators (subject to approval by the European Commission) for a limited period of time to facilitate a major infrastructure project and make it commercially more attractive by allowing suppliers to fully book a pipeline's capacity without open competition.

Following the approval from the relevant regulatory authorities in Italy, Greece, and Albania, in 2013 the European Commission formally approved TAP's application for a TPA exemption for the initial capacity of 10 bcm for a period of 25 years, which required the pipeline to come online within six years, by June 2019, for the exemption decision to be valid. In 2014, amid anticipated delays in the project's completion, TAP obtained its first TPA extension for the project completion by December 2020.

Despite the expected end of the pandemic and the expectation that this will be followed by some sort of gradual recovery in 2021, the COVID-19 crisis will almost certainly have a long-term impact on natural gas markets. According to the IEA, the "repercussions of the 2020 crisis on growth are set to result in 75 bcm of lost annual demand by 2025, which is the same size as the global annual increase in demand in 2019."

Most of the post-COVID-19 growth will happen in Asia, led by China and India. Europe's demand is expected to go through a moderate recovery, thus keeping natural gas prices low on the Old Continent. All this also means low revenues for the natural gas suppliers participating in the Southern Gas Corridor.

Undoubtedly, one of the key trends that will increasingly characterize the development of energy infrastructure projects in the near perspective is the transition to clean energy. The trend will be particularly acute in Europe. In December 2019, the European Commission presented the European Green Deal, a set of policies aimed at making the EU climate neutral by 2050. As part of this Deal, the Commission proposed to increase its 40 percent greenhouse gas emission reduction target to 50 percent or more (against baseline 1990 levels) in the decade ahead. While the bloc seems to be divided over the target, most EU member states acknowledge the need for a further reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, particularly in the energy sector, which accounts for 75 percent of the EU's greenhouse gas emissions.

In light of the aforementioned, there are concerns that the Southern Gas Corridor might lose its priority status for the and support from Brussels, which would thus call into question the future expansion of the corridor. The concerns, however, are misplaced, as current projects—including SGC—will not be affected by the European Green Deal.

At the most recent ministerial meeting of the SGC's Advisory Council held in Baku in February 2020, Klaus-Dieter Borchardt, the European Commission's deputy director general in charge of coordinating energy policy, the Energy Union, and external energy policy, underscored that the European Green Pact does not contradict the development or even expansion of the Southern Gas Corridor. Furthermore, by virtue of the fact that natural gas is the cleanest fossil fuel, it is widely accepted as a transition fuel towards a low and zero-carbon economy. In this respect,

the senior representative of the European Commission noted that the transition to clean energy will be realized with the inclusion of natural gas.

High demand in the EU for natural gas, coupled with the bloc's aspirations towards energy supply diversification, indicates the likelihood that the expansion format of the Southern Gas Corridor will remain a key issue on the project's agenda in the post-COVID-19 period. While the construction of SGC has not yet been completed, discussions on the expansion of the corridor have long been taking place.

The SGC expansion process is unlikely to happen before 2025.

To determine the need for additional capacity, TAP is required to hold a market test in two stages. The first stage of the market test was non-binding and took place in July 2019. Its purpose was to allow natural gas shippers to express their initial interest in the future expansion of the pipeline's capacity. According to the results, which were announced in October 2019, expressions of interest for using TAP exceeded 11 bcm, thus confirming the need for conducting technical studies for the expansion of the pipeline from 10 bcm up to 20 bcm. Furthermore, as the total desired capacity exceeds the 20 bcm maximum planned capacity of the pipeline, TAP might consider an expansion that would further increase its maximum capacity to around 24 bcm.

The second stage of the market test is binding and was expected to start in the second quarter of 2020 but was postponed to January 2021. However, due to poor energy market conditions and uncertainties caused by COVID-19, TAP's transmission system operators further postponed the binding bidding phase to July 2021.

Based on the results of the binding market test, a decision by TAP to expand the pipeline will be made. As actual construction time for any of the expansion works takes up to three years, which suggests that the expansion process is unlikely to happen before 2025.

Expansion Sources

While there are many potential sources of natural gas that can be supplied for an expanded version of the Southern Gas Corridor, Azerbaijan currently seems to be one of the most feasible options. However, depending on domestic production and consumption scenarios, Azerbaijan's natural gas supplies alone might not be enough to fully book the maximum capacity of an expanded SGC.

The country's peak production years of natural gas—namely, 50 bcm per year—were expected to be 2023-2028, although the effects of COVID-19 are likely to shift this to the 2025-2030 period. This will include around 10 bcm of non-commercial associated gas from Azerbaijan's largest oil field, known as Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli (ACG), thus leaving 40 bcm of natural gas for commercial use. In case of moderate domestic demand, around 30-35 bcm of natural gas would be available for export. Azerbaijan's commitment for exporting 24 bcm of natural gas per year will leave only 5-10 bcm for an expanded SGC.

Turkmenistan is another potential supplier of natural gas to the EU. The world's fourth largest holder of proved natural gas reserves has long been welcomed by the EU and other partners to join the SGC project via the Trans-Caspian Pipeline (TCP)—a proposed natural gas pipeline that would run under the Caspian Sea from Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan.

Discussions on the realization of the TCP project have been particularly active after the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea was signed in August 2018, in the wake of more than two decades of diplomatic efforts. While the convention addresses the legal obstacles on the way to building the TCP, the project's prospects remain unclear due to a number of commercial and also political considerations.

Having said that, modest exports of Turkmen gas to Azerbaijan, either via a small Trans-Caspian link or as swaps via Iran or even Russia, are quite plausible in the near perspective.

The Russia Question

For some time growing concerns have been expressed in parts of the West that Russia's Gazprom could book capacity in an expanded version of TAP—the corridor's final leg located in the EU. As mentioned earlier, due to the Third-Party Access exemption granted by EU regulators, TAP's initial capacity of 10 bcm per year is exclusively reserved to suppliers from Azerbaijan for 25 years. Once expanded, however, the pipeline's additional capacity would be opened for third-party access, meaning that other potential suppliers, including Russia's Gazprom, could book TAP's capacity for delivering natural gas to the Italian market, as well as other ones in the European Union. Although Russia's potential participation in the project contradicts the EU's aspirations to diversify

energy supplies and reduce its dependency on Moscow, the involvement of Gazprom in the TAP expansion under the current EU regulations is legal and quite plausible.

Technically, Moscow could also use the TurkStream pipeline, which stretches from Russia to Turkey across the Black Sea, to supply natural gas to TAP. The TurkStream project, launched by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in January 2020, has a total capacity of 31.5 bcm. The first line, which has a capacity of 15.75 bcm, envisages natural gas supplies to Turkey; the second line, which has a similar capacity, is designed to transport Russian gas into the EU through member state Bulgaria.

If warranted, Russia could easily build an additional line to supply natural gas to TAP. In fact, its original design—which was known as South Stream—envisaged the construction of four lines with a total capacity of 63 bcm directly to Bulgaria. However, the European Parliament adopted a resolution in 2014 opposing the project on the grounds that it violated the EU's energy rules. As a result, Russia was forced to re-route the project to Turkey and halve its capacity.

In announcing the results of the first market test, TAP did not reveal any information about the companies that had expressed interest in booking the pipeline's additional capacity, as such information is confidential. Therefore, there is no way of knowing whether Russia's Gazprom expressed an interest in the TAP expansion. However, amid the current uncertainties over the future of Nord Stream 2—an additional 1,200 km-long offshore pipeline being constructed to supply natural gas from Russia to Europe across the Baltic Sea—it is quite possible that Russia may have expressed its interest in booking TAP's addition capacity in order to hedge its bets.

Russia might use the SGC expansion as a medium for delivering its own gas from TurkStream to Italy and beyond.

Looking Ahead

The new coronavirus outbreak has substantially complicated the realization of the Southern Gas Corridor. Its investors have been forced to adopt numerous safety measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the communities engaged in the construction and operation activities of the corridor. Limitations on flights and the delivery of staff and materials have put additional hurdles on the project's completion whilst increasing its costs. However, the construction of SGC has not stopped, and the project seems to be steadily progressing towards delivering its first gas by the end of 2020, as planned.

Despite the anticipated end of the pandemic and the expectation that this will be followed by some sort of gradual recovery in 2021, low demand and low prices for natural gas will remain the likely predominant reality in the immediate post-COVID-19 period, thus further depressing the revenues of SGC shareholders. Another important trend that will be increasingly characterizing the development of energy infrastructure projects in the near perspective is the EU's transition towards clean energy. However, the shift will not impact the development or even the possible expansion of the Southern Gas Corridor.

While there are many potential sources of natural gas supplies for this expanded version of SGC, Azerbaijan currently seems to be one of the most feasible options. However, depending on domestic production and consumption scenarios, Azerbaijan's natural gas supplies alone might not be enough to fully book the maximum capacity of an expanded SGC. Amid the current uncertainties over the future of Nord Stream 2, proponents of European energy security are concerned that Russia might use the SGC expansion as a medium for delivering its own gas from TurkStream to Italy and beyond. Lastly, the prospects of building the Trans-Caspian Pipeline to connect gas from Turkmenistan with an expanded SGC remain unclear due to a number of commercial and political considerations. BD

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The Karabakh Peace Process

Rebuilding Trust for International Engagement

Dennis Sammut

The engagement of the international community in dealing with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been somewhat erratic and the efforts to broker a peace deal largely unsuccessful. Short outbursts of violence now regularly alternate with even shorter moments of optimism when peace appears within reach.

Since the ceasefire agreement of 1994, geopolitical considerations have contributed to the reinforcement of deeply entrenched local animosities, fears, and distrusts, all of which have reduced the ability of the international community to act as an honest broker. A conflict that many believed could have been defused and resolved 30 years ago now appears intractable and unsolvable.

In the meantime, ongoing peacebuilding efforts—from the track 1 OSCE Minsk Group co-chair mediation to the EU-supported track 2 peacebuilding initiatives—need to step-up their efforts, focusing on a number of directions including incremental peaceful and negotiated changes to the situation on the ground in the conflict zone; confidence-building measures between Armenia and Azerbaijan; and people-to-people contacts and initiatives involving the populations affected by the conflict. These need to run in parallel with renewed, meaningful, and substantial negotiations on substance in a mutually reenforcing way. The next task of the mediators is to convince the sides of the expediency of this approach.

The Conflict in Brief

In the early twentieth century, as the Russian and Ottoman empires collapsed, nationalism emerged as a strong force in the South Caucasus with the birth of the short-lived independent republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. That process, and the demarcation of the borders of the three states, happened in somewhat chaotic circumstances, leaving many unresolved issues that continue to haunt the region. Soviet rule with an internationalist doctrine at its core, and its nationalities policy within a single Soviet Union, by and large froze many of the issues for nearly seventy years, until it emerged again once the Soviet Union started disintegrating and the hold of the Communist Party on Moscow's periphery started to ease.

The Soviet leadership under Mikhail Gorbachev is often accused of mishandling the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. Certainly, the easing of a tight central control offered plenty of opportunities for individual power centers—the KGB, the Ministry of Defense, and others—to push their own agendas. Even within these institutions, vertical power became weak or non-existent, and many officials deployed in far flung corners of the once mighty USSR found themselves left to their own devices in the absence of instructions. Some exploited this, to the point of selling arms from their inventories to sides in the many local conflicts that erupted.

Relations between Armenians and Azerbaijanis deteriorated as a wave of nationalism swept over the entire South Caucasus. This resulted in many terrible stories of human suffering as people were killed because of their ethnicity, whole populations were displaced, and in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, an ugly conflict lasting nearly five years left 30,000 dead and many more suffering the consequences of war.

An uneasy ceasefire has been in place since 1994, and an international mediation effort under the auspices of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has been ongoing since 1992. The ceasefire is breached nearly every day with incidents for which both sides blame each other. On two occasions, in April 2016 and more recently in July 2020, sharp escalation in violence resulted in dozens of deaths and a fear the region may once more become embroiled in an all-out war. That this has not happened offers absolutely no guarantee that it will not happen in the future.

So far the Karabakh mediation process has failed and people across the conflict divide have lost trust in it. Rebuilding this trust will require an international effort.

***Dennis Sammut** is Director of LINKS Europe, and has worked and commented on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and peace process for more than two decades.*

Expectations from the efforts of the international community to resolve the conflict have been high. But so far the Nagorno-Karabakh mediation process has failed and people across the conflict divide have lost trust in it. Rebuilding this trust will require an international effort.

The OSCE Minsk Process

Overwhelmed by euphoria and chaos following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the international community stumbled indecisively to respond to ongoing fighting between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Nagorno-Karabakh in the early 1990s.

Up to December 1991 the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was an internal matter of the Soviet Union. When the Union collapsed, the 15 constituent republics were recognized as independent states and applied to join the United Nations. In late January 1992, Armenia and Azerbaijan were admitted as full members of the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). Since at the time the UN had its hands full with a number of other major issues, it was the CSCE (renamed and re-organized in December 1994 as the OSCE)—the guardian of the Helsinki Final Act and other key agreements between East and West—that took the lead on the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh that had already been raging for several years.

The CSCE Council meeting in Helsinki in late March 1992 requested the CSCE Chairman-in-Office to convene a conference on Nagorno-Karabakh as soon as possible; provide an ongoing forum for negotiations towards a peaceful settlement of the crisis on the basis of the principles, commitments, and provisions of the CSCE; and hold this conference in Minsk. A number of countries were designated as the Minsk Group to coordinate the process. The Swedes held the Chairmanship of the CSCE in 1992 and provided one of the two co-chairs. It was considered a sine qua non that the other one had to be Russia. Thus was born the Minsk Process.

Diplomats who were directly involved in this early period are on record in saying they had no idea how they were going to deal with the issue. Veteran Russian ambassador Vladimir Kazimirov says that the process was "somewhat chaotic." The international community needed both to do something and to be seen as doing something, but nearly all the cards were held by Russia. This conundrum has bedeviled the Minsk Process ever since.

In 1996, when the post of co-chair became vacant, both the United States and France started lobbying for the place, and diplomats in their wisdom decided to have three co-chairs, and so the trio emerged and were formally installed in January 1997. The activity of the Minsk Process and the activity of its three co-chair mediators since their appointment in January 1997 has been chronicled many times, and it is not necessary to repeat it here. However this long life span enables an evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses in order to shed light on why the Minsk Process has so far failed.

Diplomats who were directly involved in this early period are on record in saying they had no idea how they were going to deal with the issue.

The involvement of France, Russia, and the United States in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process upped the stakes for the sides in the conflict too, with mixed results. On the one hand the involvement of three UN Security Council members in the resolution of their problems played to the ego of the countries and their leaders. After all, in 1997 Armenia and Azerbaijan were, in the bigger scheme of things, small, fragile, newly independent states with little diplomatic exposure. The invitations to meet the leaders of the co-chair countries and the attention given provided a glamour effect, in which respective Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders thereupon basked.

On the other hand, the direct involvement of the three big powers increased the suspicion amongst elites and populations, already paranoid under the weight of the baggage of history, that their respective leaders may be arm twisted into the wrong deal. This has led to an increasing entrenchment of maximalist positions. As time passed, the glamour of hobnobbing with the great leaders of the world faded, but the entrenchment deepened.

The following question therefore arises: if the mediation had been done by, say, a Swedish diplomat under a UN mandate instead of representatives of three big powers, would the outcome have been different, or less, or more?

The blunt answer is probably not. Finesse is not the strong point of either Armenian or Azerbaijani foreign policy. Power is respected. So initially the aura of the mediators from three big powers kept the sides focused. But in truth, over the years the sides became adept at massaging the ego of the

mediators, often resorting to brinkmanship but never letting the frustration of the mediators spill over. So a Swedish diplomat may have been able to achieve the same results. On the other hand, a Swedish diplomat would not have had to worry about his country's bilateral relations with the conflict sides—not too much, anyway. France, Russia, and the United States all have interests in the region that they are keen to protect, and this to some extent has also clouded the mediation work. Thus, having the process led by diplomats of three big powers may have hindered its overall chances of success, rather than helped it.

The process has been bedeviled by a number of factors. However, intriguingly, big power rivalry does not appear to have been one of them, at least until recently. Whilst relations between the United States and its allies and Russia have deteriorated considerably, especially since the 2008 Georgia-Russia war and the 2014 Ukraine crisis, and even relations between America and France at some point appeared strained, the atmosphere of cooperation between the three co-chair mediators has, according to multiple sources, been extremely harmonious. Indeed, ironically, the Minsk co-chair mechanism appeared to take the role of a confidence-building measure—ironically not in support of a Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement, but in the management of big power relations.

Russia

In the Caucasus, Russia is always the elephant in the room. Nowhere more so than in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process, where Russia has played a double game. On the one hand it is one of the three co-chairs of the international mediation process, and it conducts itself in that context impeccably. On the other hand, from day one and since, it has run a parallel bilateral process, talking to the sides separately and together, pushing its own ideas and visions, and generally making sure everyone understands that it is that parallel process that matters.

Vladimir Putin has personally dedicated a lot of time to this issue, as he has indeed done with a number of other issues related to the Caucasus, because of the strategic importance Russia continues to attach to the region as its soft underbelly. But it was his predecessor, Dimitri Medvedev, who during his time as president really tried to pull the bull by the horns and achieve a breakthrough. He also failed. At Kazan in 2011 a deal appeared within reach, but the two sides blinked.

The question needs to be asked if Russia's role as a mediator—considered widely to be necessary—is not in fact part of the problem. Russia often uses the "white man's burden" argument to justify its role in the South Caucasus—and particularly its involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement process. Yet it has simultaneously flooded the region with sophisticated military equipment costing billions. For the sides to the conflict therefore, Russia is not primarily a mediator but an arms supplier.

Russia's not-so-hidden agenda on Karabakh is that it wants to be able to have a military force deployed in Azerbaijan as part of a peacekeeping force.

Russia's not-so-hidden agenda on Nagorno-Karabakh is that it wants to be able to have a military force deployed in Azerbaijan as part of a peacekeeping force. This Russian need has lurked in the background over the whole life span of the Minsk Process.

The Kremlin's intentions in its engagement with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict-settlement process is constantly being questioned, especially in Azerbaijan, but more recently also in Armenia. For the sake of the credibility of the peace process, Russia should be much more transparent in its intentions. It should stop providing the sides with sophisticated armaments—perhaps declaring initially a one year moratorium on arms sales, which can be extended annually. And it should be one of the countries that declares upfront that it does not have the intention of participating in any future military peacekeeping force in Nagorno-Karabakh. Such actions will contribute to restoring trust in the Minsk Process and in the efforts of its three co-chair mediators.

Ambivalent Roles

Apart from the framework of the OSCE Minsk Process, and occasional UN engagement, the other state actors to engage in any meaningful way with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement process were the United Kingdom and the European Union, working separately long before Brexit.

The UK had a historical link with the South Caucasus through the short period of independence of the first Transcaucasian republics in 1918-1920. By the time they regained their independence in

December 1991, London's main interest was largely commercial: the energy resources of the Caspian and BP's huge proposed investment in Azerbaijan. The UK swiftly opened an embassy in Baku in 1992—Tbilisi and Yerevan had to wait until 1995 and 1996, respectively. Initially, the British approach was to try to avoid the politics and the conflicts. The UK Foreign Office in this period had its hands full with events in the Balkans, and the general view in Whitehall was that the Caucasus was a largely a Russian matter. For this reason, when the Minsk Group was constituted in 1992, ostensibly to organize the Minsk Conference, Britain stayed out—to the surprise of many. Some blame this on incompetence on the part of the officials involved, others say it was perfidious Albion trying to avoid rubbing the Russians the wrong way.

In any case, that this was not such a smart decision became obvious soon thereafter, but given the usual bureaucratic lethargy, it took about a decade for London to start engaging on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement issue meaningfully. At the start of the new millennium, the Foreign Office toyed with the idea of having an experienced British diplomat, Sir Brian Fall, who had served as UK Ambassador to Russia (1992-1995), appointed to the new post of EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus. The EU procrastinated and the British lost patience: London appointed Sir Brian as the first (and last) UK Special Representative for the South Caucasus. This was meant to send a signal of increased British interest in the region, and a big part of his remit was to deal with the conflict issues. An EU Special Representative was eventually appointed, and the two co-existed merrily.

Whilst Britain adhered to the mantra of support for the Minsk Process and rejection of the idea of forum hoping, it was not averse to engage in a little bit of nudging of the process on the side. The Foreign Office recognized that whilst it was busy elsewhere, several British NGOs had engaged with the South Caucasus, including the difficult conflict issues, and their work was starting to be noticed and appreciated. Britain therefore launched what was at the time a unique and ambitious program of civil society activity in support of the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process, involving three NGOs: International Alert, Conciliation Resources and LINKS.

Operating under the brand "Consortium Initiative," they implemented a range of track 2 initiatives, with at least one—the LINKS-led South Caucasus Parliamentary Initiative (SCPI)—best considered as track 1.5 (it ran between 2003 and 2009). A number of inter-departmental disagreements on how best to utilize the British government's funding mechanism (the "conflict management pool") and another round of changed priorities meant that the Consortium Initiative was left to elapse, on the understanding that most of the work could be picked up at an EU level through a similar tool working with civil society. After much ado, in 2010 the EU launched EPNK—the European Partnership for the Support of the Peaceful Resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict. It lasted until 2019, with some breaks between phases 1 and 2 and phases 2 and 3.

After the 2008 Georgia-Russia war, the UK Ministry of Defence started taking more of a leading role on British affairs in the South Caucasus. Sir Brian Fall resigned as Special Representative in 2012 after a decade in the job, and it was decided not to replace him, but to have a Trade Envoy instead. That war also impacted the work of the EU Special Representative, whose official title changed to EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the Conflict in Georgia.

The EU was, and remains, by and large a passive observer to the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process.

This change in designation was not just symbolic. Given that the EU was now co-chair of the Geneva International Discussions on Georgia (together with the UN and the OSCE), much of the EUSR's time became devoted to issues related to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The EUSR traveled to the region two or three times a year to meet the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan, and kept in touch with the co-chairs, but the EU was, and remains, by and large a passive observer to the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. It was again left to the NGOs to maintain the most visible, and tangible, EU engagement with the conflict issues.

Part of the reason is that the EU understands that the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process is a poisoned chalice. Tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan have often resulted in unseemly and acrimonious exchanges in the councils of the OSCE and the Council of Europe, and even the EU's own EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly and Eastern Partnership gatherings have not been immune

to this. It was often argued that there was little to be gained from engaging with the conflict resolution process, that it carried a lot of risk, and that in any case the sides did not want EU involvement anyway.

The EU is now toying with the idea of another civil society initiative, EU4Peace. The fact that it allowed at least a gap of a year before the end of EPNK and the new initiative sent a negative signal about the importance the EU attaches to this work. There are some signs that the new EU High Representative on Foreign and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, is taking a more direct interest in the conflict. This is to be welcomed, for the EU, apart of its experience and its resource, also has the potential to play the role of honest broker.

The UN Security Council will have to be the ultimate guarantor of a peace agreement and that it should probably be the one that authorizes the deployment of a peacekeeping force if it ever comes to that.

But beyond this, formal EU engagement within the track 1 peace process should now be actively considered.

The beleaguered Minsk Process would benefit by a widening of the mediators' circle to include, even if only in a consultative role, the United Nations and the European Union. Both are considered important at the point where an agreement is likely, but they can also contribute to the process now.

Since becoming UN Secretary-General, António Gutteres has taken an interest in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and has signaled a readiness to engage with the peace effort. It has always been understood that the UN Security Council will have to be the ultimate guarantor of a peace agreement and that it should probably be the one that authorizes the deployment of a peacekeeping force if it ever comes to that. Whilst the UN should not replace the OSCE as the lead in the mediation efforts, there is good reason why it should be involved now, even if in a consultative capacity.

One can make the same argument for the European Union. It is often said that the EU will need to be brought in if ever a deal was reached because its money and expertise will be required for post-conflict reconstruction. There is a good case to be made for it to be brought into the process now, even if, initially at least, in a consultative capacity.

Space for Track 1.5 and Track 2 Initiatives?

There is a whole body of literature produced by think tanks and academics on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the conflict resolution process. There are also hundreds of examples of activities of all sorts that aim to promote a peaceful resolution of the conflict through joint activities, people-to-people contacts, and confidence-building measures implemented by local and international NGOs of all sorts and sizes.

By its very nature, this work of civil society is often uncoordinated and often looks erratic. This is due to a number of factors: funding for this work has not been steady and funders have been very fickle, often asking for "something new" without appreciating the need to consolidate that which had started to work, even if modestly. This partly explains why the turnover of personnel is very high, which means that there is often lack of continuity. A core of NGO activists have remained committed to the issue and have come to constitute an informal institutional memory collective of the last two or three decades of events. Civil society initiatives have also been either snubbed by the mediators and the sides to the conflict, or, worse, have been the target of often very unjustified criticism. The situation has gotten much worse since 2008, and continues to deteriorate.

The co-chair mediators have not always appreciated the contribution of think tanks and civil society in discussing the conflict and its resolution. This is partly due to the obsession of the Armenian and Azerbaijani negotiators with secrecy, as well as their distrust of their respective civil society organizations, which they each suspect to be proxies of their domestic opposition. On this point, Armenia and Azerbaijan have had perfect consensus, at least since 2008.

Instead, the sides in the conflict have tried to manipulate civil society initiatives and actors to reflect their own positions and echo their own propaganda. For example, the Armenians often insist on the engagement of civil society initiatives with the de facto authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh, seeking in doing so to increase their legitimacy, international profile, and overall acceptance; on their side, the Azerbaijanis demand that NGOs working on the conflict recognize the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, regardless of the norm that it is states that recognize states, not NGOs. The working space for civil society has been shrinking over the years, at a time when it

should be widening and expanding. A new approach on this by the sides is much needed.

There are some examples of attempts by the co-chair mediators to open a dialogue with local and international civil society organizations, a process usually instigated by the American representative on the trio. Some of the countries holding the rotating chairmanship of the OSCE in recent years—notably the Swiss and the Austrians—have also used their prerogative to push the co-chair mediators in meetings with small, select groups of NGOs. The mediators' lack of enthusiasm on these occasions was quite striking.

Given that the peace process now appears to be entering a period of reflection, it would be beneficial if civil society engagement could become more systematic through the involvement of experts from the conflict sides and beyond working on particular issues; and by moving as quickly as possible to the establishment of working groups under the auspices of the mediators to support an invigorated peace process.

Towards Conflict Settlement

It is possible that Armenia and Azerbaijan may at some point decide not to wait for the international community and together muster the necessary courage to work out a solution by themselves. Indeed one can look at some rare moments over the last three decades when this appeared to be happening, like the talks between Heydar Aliyev and Robert Kocharyan (1999) or between Ilham Aliyev and Nikol Pashinyan (2018-2019). Both of these initiatives ended nowhere, but they did show that direct talks without mediation is possible, and that there was a common ground to be discovered.

Given that the peace process now appears to be entering a period of reflection, it would be beneficial if civil society engagement could become more systematic.

But most likely, international mediation is going to be required going forward, and the existing framework is also likely to remain, simply because replacing it will be hugely disruptive and may take a long time. This does not mean, however, that the present arrangements under the auspices of the three co-chair countries cannot be improved. Indeed the process is damaged. Trust needs to be renewed in the process by the sides themselves, and more widely by their respective elites and their populations. The extent to which this trust has evaporated is not always appreciated, and hardly ever admitted. Involving the UN and the EU in some way in the work may make the process a bit more unwieldy, but will add credibility.

The border incidents between Armenia and Azerbaijan in July 2020 have left the atmosphere around the peace process poisoned, and it is going to take a lot of corrective work in the time ahead to create the right atmosphere for substantive negotiations to take place. Local and international civil society organizations, together with the think tank community, have a contribution to make, and the mediators and the sides have a duty to recognize this and facilitate their work.

In the meantime, on-going peacebuilding efforts—from the track 1 OSCE Minsk Group co-chair mediation to the EU-supported track 2 peace-building initiatives—need to step-up their efforts, focusing on a number of directions including incremental peaceful and negotiated changes to the situation on the ground in the conflict zone; confidence-building measures between Armenia and Azerbaijan; and people-to-people contacts and initiatives involving the populations affected by the conflict. These need to run in parallel with renewed and meaningful negotiations on substance in a mutually re-enforcing way. The next task of the mediators is to convince the sides of the expediency of this approach. BD

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Iran's Longstanding Cooperation with Armenia

Domestic Azerbaijani Opposition May be Rising

Brenda Shaffer

When the Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991, Iran's stable northern boundary suddenly became a shared border with five states: land borders with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan, and maritime borders with Kazakhstan and Russia. Tehran viewed this momentous change as a source of several new security challenges. Among these were maritime delimitation in the Caspian Sea and the establishment of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, two states that shared ethnic ties with large numbers of Iranian citizens.

Consequently, Tehran did not view the breakup of the Soviet Union and the establishment of six new states populated by Muslim-majorities in the Caspian region as an opportunity to expand its influence and "export the revolution." Rather, Tehran's position was defensive: protecting against this new potential source of threats. The officially-sponsored *Tehran Times*, wrote in late December 1991 that

> the first ground for concern from the point of view in Tehran is the lack of political stability in the newly independent republics. The unstable conditions in those republics could be serious causes of insecurity along the lengthy borders (over 2,000 kilometers) Iran shares with those countries. Already foreign hands can be felt at work in those republics, [e]specially in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan republics, with the ultimate objective of brewing discord among the Iranian Azeris and Turkmen by instigating ethnic and nationalistic sentiments.

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During the period of the Soviet collapse, all-out war emerged between two of Iran's new neighbors: Armenia and Azerbaijan, which created a critical security and political challenge for Tehran. This was not some faraway conflict like those in the Gaza Strip or Lebanon; this war was taking place directly on Iran's borders, and at times created refugee flows into Iran. Thus, Iran's own national security and domestic stability was seen to be directly threatened by the conflict. The danger was especially sensitive since over one third of the population of Iran is ethnic-Azerbaijani; the regions of northwest Iran that are contiguous to the conflict zone—East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, and Ardebil—are populated primarily by ethnic-Azerbaijanis, many of whom share family ties with co-ethnics in the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Tehran almost always puts pragmatic interests above ideology in instances where Islamic solidarity conflicts with primary geopolitical interests.

While the ruling regime in Iran formally asserts that its foreign policy is based on Islamic solidarity, Tehran almost always puts pragmatic interests above ideology in instances where Islamic solidarity conflicts with primary geopolitical interests. In the specific case of the war between two of its northern neighbors, the clash between ideological and pragmatic considerations was unmistakable: Christian-populated Armenia had invaded Shia majority Azerbaijan (the only majority-Shia former Soviet republic), captured close to 20 percent of its territory, and turned almost one million Azerbaijani Shia into refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

However, the devastation created by the war and occupation in Azerbaijan in the early years of the conflict served a main Iranian policy goal by dimming the new country's attraction to Iran's Azerbaijani minority. Thus, Tehran adopted a policy in support of Yerevan in the war with Azerbaijan and has continued to engage in close cooperation with Armenia until the present day.

In January 2008, Mahmoud Vaezi, Iran's then-Deputy Foreign Minister responsible for the former Soviet region (he now

serves as chief of staff to the country's president) wrote the following about how Iran had approached the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict during the early war period:

> Iran was in the neighborhood of the environment of the conflict. Karabakh is situated only 40 km distance from its borders. At that time, this possibility raised that the boundaries of conflict extended to the beyond of Karabakh. Since then, Iran's consideration was based on security perceptions. [...] Iran could not be indifferent to the developments occurring along its borders, security changes of the borders and their impact on Iran's internal developments.

Tehran's policy tilt toward Armenia—for reasons of security, as Vaezi made clear—was predicated on the assumption that Iran's domestic Azerbaijani community would not mount significant opposition to this policy. For most of the period since the emergence of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, Tehran's bet had paid off.

Iran's main concern was preventing identification of its domestic Azerbaijani community with the new Republic of Azerbaijan.

However, growing awareness of the extent of cooperation and ties between Tehran and Yerevan, violent flare-ups between Armenia and Azerbaijan that caused significant casualties, and a wave of anti-regime protests in Iran since late 2017, have increased opposition to Iranian-Armenian cooperation among Iran's ethnic-Azerbaijani community, both at grassroots and elite levels. Iran's tilt may thus become domestically costly and difficult to sustain.

This essay will examine the activity and attitudes of Iran's ethnic-Azerbaijani population as it relates to Iranian cooperation with Armenia and Tehran's tilt toward Yerevan in its conflict with Azerbaijan, beginning with a discussion of Iranian policies toward the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict.

Iran's Policy

From the beginning of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, the main factor weighing on Iran's policy toward the war was the perceived impact on its security. Tehran held no special sentiments for Azerbaijanis as co-religionists. Iran's main concern was preventing identification of its domestic Azerbaijani community with the new Republic of Azerbaijan. In 1992, Mahmoud Vaezi (the country's aforementioned then-deputy foreign minister), pointed to internal considerations as one of Iran's major factors in its policy toward the Karabakh conflict. According to an Armenian official I interviewed in winter 2000, Tehran put pressure on Armenia to reject U.S.-initiated peace proposals (the "Goble Plan") that would have led Armenia to cede back to Azerbaijan control of territory bordering Iran. The Islamic Republic preferred to preserve a large de facto border with Armenia to limit ties between Azerbaijan and Iran's ethnic-Azerbaijani population. Vaezi also stated Iran's preference for a border with Armenia (and opposition to direct links between Turkey and Azerbaijan):

While officially Tehran remained neutral, Iran served as Armenia's main supply route during most of the war.

> Iran expressed its opposition to the change of political geography of the region. If this plan could have been somehow implemented it would have had wide political, economic and security effects on the region. Linking Nakhchevan to Azerbaijan would have reduced the importance of Iran's unique and distinctive position in the Caucasus and interrupted Iran's linkage with Armenia.

The activities of the main political actors in Azerbaijan during the Soviet collapse and the policies of the Republic of Azerbaijan's first post-independence governments reinforced Tehran's fears that Baku would engage in irredentism. During the late 1980s and the initial independence period, the Popular Front of Azerbaijan political movement campaigned for language and cultural rights and eventual reunification with ethnic-Azerbaijanis residing in northeastern Iran, to which they referred as "South Azerbaijan." Prior to the Soviet collapse, beginning in December 1989, large-scale protests of Azerbaijanis emerged in the border area between Iran and Soviet Azerbaijan, in the region of Nakhchevan. Activists from Baku, together with local villagers, held rallies in the border area, and attempted to communicate with co-ethnics and family members in Iran. The protestors also destroyed some of the border posts.

After the renewal of Azerbaijan's independence, President Abulfez Elchibey (1992-1993) elevated the campaign for language and cultural rights for ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Iran to the level of state policy. For instance, the new state's new elementary school textbooks' covers displayed a map of historical Azerbaijan that included territories in present-day Iran.

Tehran developed relations and trade with Armenia during the height of the battles between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 1992-1994. During the war period, Armenian and Iranian officials conducted regular high-level visits and cordial exchanges.

While officially Tehran remained neutral, Iran served as Armenia's main supply route during most of the war. In 1992 and 1993, supply routes from all of Armenia's neighbors except for Iran were closed or unreliable: for example, a civil war in neighboring Georgia hindered Russia from using land routes to supply Yerevan. Armenia was able to continue the war effort due to critical fuel and food supplies that reached it through Iran. For instance, in April 1992, at one of the most critical points in the conflict, Iran agreed to supply fuel to Armenia and improved transportation links with Armenia. Moreover, Russian fuel was often delivered to Armenia by way of Iran. Iranian fuel supplies critical for the war effort included oil for heavy vehicles and coal for heat and cooking. Hrant Melik-Shahnazaryan, an Armenian specialist on Iran's policies in the South Caucasus, claimed in May 2011 that "Iran [had] provided Armenia's food safety during the war."

In April 1992, two cargo planes of aid funded by ethnic-Armenians in Iran arrived in Yerevan. The planes were dispatched to Armenia by the Iranian Red Crescent. Iranian Armenians also reportedly contributed funds to the construction of a bridge linking Armenia and Iran, which was inaugurated in May 1992. During the war, the sides inaugurated direct flights between Tehran and Yerevan.

Armenian officials thanked Iran a number of times for the supplies and for serving as a supply route. For instance, Armenian Prime Minister and Vice President Gagik Harutyunyan remarked in May 1992, in a ceremony opening a bridge over the Araz river that this would contribute to his country's economic stability by providing alternatives to transport routes blocked as a result of the war. The bridge was opened just after Armenian forces had captured the pivotal city of Shusha, the historical capital of Azerbaijanis in the Karabakh region. Shusha was captured by Armenia's forces while Tehran was holding a peace summit of the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Despite the embarrassing timing, Tehran offered no condemnation of Yerevan: Iranian reaction was limited to an expression of "concern over the recent developments in Karabakh." Tehran continued to forge ahead with trade and cooperation with Yerevan.

Considering that the Armenians sought to change existing borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan and occupied a significant amount of Azerbaijan's internationally recognized territory, the lack of Iranian criticism and the adoption of a "balanced" approach to the sides in actuality favored Armenia. Iranian official media often adopts the Armenian official practice of referring to the occupied territories as the "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic" despite the fact that the Iranian government does not recognize the occupied territories as a state or recognize Armenia's sovereignty over these territories.

In regional fora with Muslim-majority state membership, such as the Economic Cooperation Organization, Tehran has refrained from criticizing Armenia. Iranian representatives and Iranian official media reserved their criticisms in the early 1990s for "colonial powers" and other external agents, such as Russia, Turkey, the United States, and occasionally the "Zionists," and even blamed Elchibey for the conflict with Armenia, while refraining from pointing a finger at Yerevan.

Tehran's rhetoric toward the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict has not changed significantly in recent years. Iran's official media shows no special feelings toward the refugees and IDPs in Azerbaijan or Azerbaijan's loss of control of its lands, nor special identification or solidarity with Azerbaijan as Muslims or Shiites. However, a small shift in the official Iranian messaging took place around 2012: Iranian officials and official media began to add that Iran supports "Azerbaijan's territorial integrity," which would imply return of the territories captured by Armenia.

One of the best indications of Iran's conciliatory position toward Armenia is the fact that Armenian representatives in the 1990s repeatedly praised Iran's role in the negotiation process, expressed their preference for Tehran over many other foreign representatives, and called for the deployment of Iranian observers along the borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Armenia's first post-independence president, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, stated in May 1992 that "the Iranians have proved their complete impartiality in this issue, respecting the rights of both sides and striving for a just solution, and therefore the sides trust Iran."

During his September 2011 visit to Iran, Armenian foreign minister Eduard Nalbandyan praised Tehran's position on the conflict with Azerbaijan, stating that he

"appreciated the Islamic Republic of Iran for presenting proper and balanced views on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, and expressed the hope that Tehran would maintain the same stance and continue presenting such positive views in future."

In contrast, Azerbaijan's representatives voiced critical statements regarding Iran's role in the negotiations, illustrating their perception that Tehran was not promoting their interests. As Elchibey remarked in May 1992:

> Unfortunately, there was no benefit from the activity of Iran's peacemaking mission, for example. Khodzhaly fell after their first visit to Karabagh, and Shusha fell after their second visit, and the fall of Lachin is the sequel to this.

In 1994, Iranian officials also stated that early in his term as president of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev had complained to Tehran about its cooperation with Armenia.

Iran openly advocates for expanding its cooperation with Armenia, including in infrastructure projects that traverse the occupied territories. Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad remarked during Nalbandyan's September 2011 visit that "Tehran-Yerevan ties could be enhanced promptly as Iran considers no limits on its relations with Armenia."

On a visit to Yerevan in late January 2015, Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif remarked that "Iran is ready to cooperate with Armenia in different areas, including telecommunications, railway, energy, gas, electricity and the cleaning of the Aras river."

Iran and Armenia also continue to engage in energy trade: Iran supplies natural gas to Armenia, while Armenia supplies Iran with electricity from its nuclear power plant. During Prime Minister Pashinyan's February 2019 visit to Iran, the sides expressed support for the establishment of an additional electricity line between the countries to expand Armenia's electricity exports to Iran. During the same visit, Pashinyan expressed support for Armenia serving as a transit state for Iranian natural gas supplies to Europe.

Iran is even involved in infrastructure projects located in the Azerbaijani territories occupied by Armenia. For instance, in 2010 Iranian and Armenian company officials inaugurated a hydroelectric dam on the Araz river near the Khoda Afarin Bridge in an area that straddles Iran and the occupied territories. (It should be noted, however, that in 2016 Iran and Azerbaijan signed an agreement allowing Iran to use the occupied territories, thus Iran reconfirmed its recognition of Azerbaijan's sovereignty over the territory. Tehran also agreed that the Armenian side could not display any national symbols, such as flags, at the plant and dam.) Moreover, products in Iran are supplied directly to the occupied territories and Iranian companies and individuals conduct direct trade with entities there. Iran also supports a radio station that broadcasts in the Talysh language (a Persian dialect) from the occupied city of Shusha, targeting the Talysh minority in Azerbaijan. Iranian companies have also conducted restoration work on mosques in the occupied territories, such as the Govhar aga in Shusha.

Since late 2017, as open public opposition to the Iranian regime has grown, so has open opposition to Iran's cooperation with Armenia.

The Role of Ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Iran

Tehran's close cooperation with Armenia is grounded on the assumption that Iran's domestic Azerbaijani community will neither actively nor strongly oppose this policy. For most of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, Iranian Azerbaijanis have expressed support for Azerbaijan and some criticism of Tehran's close cooperation with Armenia, but the opposition was not sufficient to impose a constraint on Iranian-Armenian cooperation.

Since late 2017, as open public opposition to the Iranian regime has grown, so has open opposition to Iran's cooperation with Armenia. In parallel, Iran's ethnic-Azerbaijani community has received through social media a better picture of the extent of Iranian-Armenian cooperation, including Iran's direct aid to the occupation forces in the Armenian-occupied territories of Azerbaijan. Flare-ups in the conflict that resulted in significant Azerbaijani casualties have also galvanized opposition among ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Iran. Since late 2017, several events have sparked a significant ethnic-Azerbaijani response in Iran: the visit of Armenia's prime minister to Iran (February 2019), appearance on social media of clips of Iranian aid and trade convoys to the Armenian occupation forces (spring 2020), and the recent reignition of the conflict (July 2020).

During the initial war period (1992-1994), Iranian ethnic-Azerbaijani activists publicly

criticized Tehran's policy toward the conflict. The activists distributed petitions, held demonstrations, and ethnic-Azerbaijani members of the Iranian parliament condemned Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijan's lands and Tehran's support for Armenia.

In addition, during the war period, Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Abdulkarim Mousavi Ardebeli, an ethnic-Azerbaijani cleric, often mentioned the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in his Friday sermons and frequently expressed solidarity with the Azerbaijani side. Iranian deputies from its majority ethnic-Azerbaijani provinces led campaigns aimed at limiting Iranian relations with Armenia, openly called for Tehran's assistance to Azerbaijan, and participated in demonstrations against Armenia. Ethnic-Azerbaijani parliament members distributed petitions. In April 1993, Kamel Abedinzadeh, an ethnic-Azerbaijani deputy from Khoy, even spoke in the Azerbaijani language in the Iranian Majles when he condemned Armenian actions against Azerbaijan. He also issued press releases for publication in *Hamshahri* and other Iranian journals on this issue.

Iranian officials of ethnic-Azerbaijani origin and parliament members from the ethnic-Azerbaijani populated regions of Iran also expressed views on the conflict that contradicted Tehran's official policy that did not criticize Armenia. In a September 2010 interview for a news service in Azerbaijan, Iran's Vice-President for Parliamentary Affairs, Sayyed Mohammad-Reza Mir-Tajeddini, stated that

> Nagorno-Karabakh is Azerbaijani territory. We cannot support an Armenian policy of aggression and occupation that aims to separate the region from Azerbaijan. [...] As part of my activities as an MP from Tabriz, I wrote an article about the situation with the Agdam mosque and denounced this fact. Several other members joined me. Naturally, we condemn any disrespect to Islam. A mosque is a symbol of religion and faith. The mosques in Karabakh are not an exception. Our theologians condemn the desecration of mosques.

In addition, in several protests, Iranian ethnic-Azerbaijanis expressed their solidarity with Azerbaijan and criticized the Iranian government's support for Armenia in the conflict. In May 1992, 200 students demonstrating at Tabriz University chanted "Death to Armenia" and, alluding to Tehran, described the "silence of the Muslims," in the face of the Armenian "criminal activities" as "treason to the Quran." According to the Iranian newspaper *Salam*, the ethnic-Azerbaijani demonstrators

in Tabriz urged Tehran to support Azerbaijan in this struggle during a march that was marked by "nationalist fervor and slogans." *Salam* reported that the demonstration was held "despite the opposition of the authorities." The next year, Tehran University students held a demonstration in front of the Armenian embassy to show their support for Azerbaijan in the conflict. During the demonstration, the embassy was stoned, and subsequently the Iranian ambassador in Yerevan was summoned by the Armenian foreign minister to explain the incident.

Iran allows the publication of a limited number of literary journals in the languages of its ethnic minorities. *Varliq* is a bilingual Azerbaijani-Persian publication produced in Tehran, and it is the only Azerbaijani-language journal that has been published since the revolution in 1979. It has frequently published articles on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, often expressing solidarity with Azerbaijan. In spring 1994, the journal's editor, Javad Heyat, addressed an article to then Turkish President Süleyman Demirel, calling on Turkey to come to Azerbaijan's aid. *Varliq* has frequently carried articles about Azerbaijani victims of this conflict, as well as poems written in memory of fallen Azerbaijani soldiers.

In addition, ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Iran have been involved in providing aid to their co-ethnics in Azerbaijan. In 1992-1993, much of the humanitarian and refugee assistance from Iran to the Republic of Azerbaijan was organized directly from Iran's majority ethnic-Azerbaijani provinces. Beginning in summer 1992, some of the Azerbaijanis wounded in the war with Armenia were treated in Tabriz hospitals. Throughout 1992-1993, and initially organized by ethnic-Azerbaijani representatives from the Iranian provinces, convoys of supplies and other aid were sent directly from these provinces to the needy and refugees in Azerbaijan. For instance, a delegation from Urmia in June 1992 set up a refugee center in Nakhchevan and Iran's East Azerbaijan Province opened a refugee camp within the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan in September 1993.

In May 2006, mass demonstrations broke out in Tabriz, Tehran, and other cities in Iran with large ethnic-Azerbaijani populations in response to a caricature in an official Iranian newspaper that equated Azerbaijanis to cockroaches. Iranian security forces killed dozens of protestors and arrested hundreds and many were convicted of violations and sent for long prison

sentences. During the demonstrations, support for Azerbaijan regaining control of the occupied territories was also expressed.

In mid-January 2008, the Iranian government approved the opening of an Armenian consulate in Tabriz, a city in northern Iran populated primarily by ethnic-Azerbaijanis. This decision was reportedly protested by a petition campaign among Azerbaijanis in Iran. Nevertheless, Tehran continued to encourage Armenia to open the consulate.

In the last two decades, Iranian soccer matches have also become a venue for frequent expression of ethnic sentiments among ethnic-Azerbaijani fans of Tabriz's main soccer team, Traktor Azerbaijan (formerly Traktor Sazi), and of ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Tehran. Teams and their fans from Persian-majority centers also often unfurl Armenian flags at games in attempt to incite the ethnic-Azerbaijani players.

In recent years, anti-Armenian sentiment has been expressed regularly at matches. A few days after Pashinyan's February 2019 visit to Iran, for instance, Traktor fans burned an Armenian flag during a match. They also waived the flag of the Republic of Azerbaijan and chanted "Karabakh is and will be ours." Reportedly, Iranian security forces arrested 29 ethnic-Azerbaijani citizens for participation in this activity during the soccer match.

Pashinyan's visit to Iran in February 2019 was a trigger for ethnic-Azerbaijanis in the country. During his visit, in meetings with Pashinyan, the Iranian Armenian community hung banners stating that "Karabakh is Armenia," and the prime minister posted pictures with these banners, all uninhibited by Pashinyan's Iranian hosts. Ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Iran responded with protests in front of the Armenian embassy in Tehran and stuck posters on the embassy's walls stating that "Karabakh is an integral part of Azerbaijan."

Azerbaijanis in Iran reacted to the April 2020 open appearance of evidence of Iran's aid to Armenians in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan.

In an Iranian parliament session following Pashinyan's visit, Ruhulla Hezretpur, a deputy from the majority ethnic-Azerbaijani city of Urmia, denounced the visit and Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijani lands. He also condemned the fact that the visit had taken place during the anniversary of the Khojaly massacre of Azerbaijanis in the hands of Armenians. He pointed out that according to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, "Karabakh is an Islamic land. Now I ask, what is the difference between Palestine and Karabakh?" Hezretpur also read a nationalist poem in the Azerbaijani language and was booed by Majlis members.

Most recently, Azerbaijanis in Iran reacted to the April 2020 open appearance of evidence of Iran's aid to Armenia in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan. While Iranian trade and cooperation with the Armenian occupation forces has been taking place since the war period, the surfacing of clips and films verifying this cooperation spurred public complaints from ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Iran and in various media. Some suggested blowing up the gas pipeline to Armenia or sabotaging the bridges between Armenia and Iran, all which run through areas of Iran inhabited by ethnic-Azerbaijanis.

Ethnic-Azerbaijanis also called for protests against Armenia in front of the Armenian embassy in Tehran and many Azerbaijani populated cities in Iran in response to a July 2020 flare-up of conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan that led to many casualties. Iranian security forces arrested dozens of ethnic-Azerbaijani activists on the eve of the planned demonstrations to preempt them. Consequently, only small numbers of protestors managed to demonstrate.

None of these events—taken in their own—have been significant enough to change Iran's policy on the conflict; but through the policy of arrests, it is clear the regime fears further activity. Moreover, should wider protests against the ruling regime take place, Tehran's policy of cooperation with Armenia will increase the incentive of Iran's domestic Azerbaijani population to protest.

Coming to an End?

Iran's policy on the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict strongly illustrates the interconnection between Iran's foreign policy and domestic issues. More than half of Iran's citizens are of non-Persian origin, belonging to ethnic groups that share ties with groups in bordering states: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkmenistan, Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. These groups can put pressure on Tehran's ties with neighboring states and some of those states pay close attention to Tehran's policies toward co-ethnics in Iran. This creates not so simple policy challenges for Iran. To date, the ruling regime in Tehran has been able to weather domestic Azerbaijani opposition to its close cooperation with Armenia. Continued flare-ups in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan may lead to increased domestic pressure on Tehran to end its support for Armenia in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. BD

The OSCE and Minorities in the Silk Road Region

Fostering Social Cohesion and Integration

Lamberto Zannier, with Eleonora Lotti

At the beginning of the 1990s new conflicts erupted in Europe as new borders appeared on the map following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia. As emerging states were striving to assert new identities (or revive old ones), various minorities found themselves living within new national borders, which in a number of cases provoked instability and conflict, with geopolitics complicating these dynamics even further. As quickly became apparent, some of these divisions were so deep that a number of those conflicts remain unresolved.

It was against this background that the OSCE participating States, in a spirit of cooperation, decided almost three decades ago to establish the function of a High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM). The HCNM has a two-fold mandate: firstly, to provide "early warning" at the first sign of imminent conflict in the OSCE area arising from tensions involving national minorities; secondly, to provide "early action" in regard to national minority issues that have the potential to develop into conflict.

This mandate takes the form of assisting OSCE participating States to develop and implement policies that facilitate the integration of diverse societies, which is key to conflict prevention. While the protection of minority identities and rights is certainly a thread running through the HCNM's work, minorities and the dynamics between minority and majority groups are approached from a conflict-prevention perspective: a clear recognition that at a time when the degree of diversity in our societies has dramatically increased, the promotion of policies that facilitate integration is one of the most effective tools for preventing crises and conflicts rooted in such diversity.

Lamberto Zannier *holds the rank of ambassador in the Italian diplomatic service and recently completed his term as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. He previously served as OSCE Secretary General after having held the rank of UN Under-Secretary-General and Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General as Head of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK).* ***Eleonora Lotti*** *serves as Personal Adviser to the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities.*

As the degree of geopolitical confrontation has steadily increased in recent years, international cooperation in preventing and resolving conflicts has become less straightforward, including in in the OSCE area. In fact, classic inter-state conflict has almost disappeared around the world. Acute crises and conflicts have become increasingly hybrid and are often characterized by internal strife, sometimes in the context of failed or dysfunctional states, or violent separatism, in some cases accompanied by quasi-military operations affecting civilian populations. Many societies remain divided along ethnic, political, religious, historical, cultural, and linguistic lines. These fault lines can ignite crises and conflicts. In order to address them effectively, we have found that traditional, short-term conflict-prevention tools are oftentimes insufficient and in some cases plainly ineffective.

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Population movements, including through immigration, further diversify the demographic composition of our societies, posing specific additional challenges to their cohesion. Against this backdrop, populistic or nationalistic policies have found fertile ground in many OSCE participating States, further complicating the challenge of promoting the progressive integration of societies in an inclusive manner through a broad and balanced range of policies. Along with the increasing appearance of inflammatory language in mainstream political discourse, hate speech and hate crimes are on the rise. These dynamics have the potential to further marginalize the more vulnerable communities in a given society and, in some cases, can pave the way to radicalization and violent extremism.

These political trends also affect national minorities, which increasingly look for support and protection from states with whom they share ethnic, linguistic, or cultural affinity (the so-called "kin-states"). We see many situations in the OSCE where national minorities resist integration, demanding levels of autonomy that would effectively isolate them from the rest of the society of the country where they reside. The space within which we can find common ground between different parties has shrunk. States are increasingly urging the international community to take action against other states' policies that negatively affect "their" communities residing there, while, in some cases, resisting requests to vet their own policies affecting the national minority groups residing on their own territory.

This, in short, is the geopolitical landscape in which I operated throughout my three-year term as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, which recently came to an end. Within the OSCE space, successive High Commissioners have prioritized their geographical engagement based on various factors, including conflict potential; the level of access, dialogue, and leverage; and the availability of best practices that have the potential to be successfully adapted to different contexts. Therefore, I did not simply engage with and visit a country because it might face or is facing an imminent risk of interethnic stability. A lot of my work involved engaging with specific countries to become better acquainted with existing regulatory frameworks to protect minority rights, to better understand and if necessary foster progress in relevant integration policies, and to explore and share best practices in key policy areas.

Regional Overview

The eastern part of the OSCE space is an ethnically diverse region with strong traditions of peaceful interethnic coexistence and tolerance. The Caucasus region has a very rich and complex history as the strategic locus of important trade routes and civilizational exchanges between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea and across the Caucasus range. Early Arab historiographers referred to the Caucasus as the "mountain of tongues" to describe its incredible linguistic variety. The region has also been an area of geopolitical conflict, contested by various and successive empires that have frequently redefined its borders whilst contributing to further shaping its ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity.

Central Asia was a strategic plank of the ancient Silk Road that connected East and West: it saw the passage of many diverse peoples, which in turn created a mosaic of diversity that includes nomadic and settler populations, Turkic and Persian-speakers, living side by side in peace in the steppes and high mountains in the heart of Asia.

This entire area—which I understand some have recently taken to calling the Silk Road region—also became an object of imperial rivalries during the "Great Game" between Great Britain and Russia in the nineteenth century. Both the Caucasus and Central Asian regions were largely subsumed into the Russian Empire and later into the Soviet Union, which led to the transformation of the constituent republics during this period spanning almost a century, with mixed legacies. On the one hand, early Soviet policies encouraged nation-building within the USSR, promoting representatives of the so-called "titular" nation into lower-administrative levels of government. On the other hand, national aspirations were thwarted by drawing complex borders, resettling populations, and employing other divide-and-rule tactics. Nonetheless, the attempt to create a common state identity, with Russian as a *lingua franca*, together with socio-economic and infrastructural development, helped make diverse peoples feel part of a common Soviet destiny.

The breakup of the Soviet Union resulted in a number of challenges in the Silk Road region, which still have repercussions today.

The breakup of the Soviet Union resulted in a number of challenges in the Silk Road region, which still have repercussions today. New states emerged or regained their independence. Some states, like Tajikistan, descended into civil war along regional, ethnic, and ideological lines. Other Central Asian countries experienced flashes of interethnic violence, such as in the Fergana Valley in the 1990s, which reignited in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010, claiming the lives of over 400 people and causing displacement. Internal fissures embroiled Georgia in civil strife and protracted secessionist wars in the 1990s. Nationalist and breakaway aspirations were pitted against each other, drawing in Russian military interventions, and exposing latent and unresolved conflicts. These later

escalated into an armed conflict between Georgia and the Russian Federation in 2008, further estranging reconciliation prospects and leaving de facto minority populations stranded. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict started even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, and regularly re-escalates, as in April 2016 and July 2020.

Added to the ever-present risk of latent conflicts reigniting, which is further complicated by geopolitics, we see that many countries in the Silk Road region also face the ongoing challenge of managing increasing diversity in their societies. To varying degrees, these states are still undergoing identity and nation-building processes, characterized by an ongoing tension between civic values, of which minority rights are a part, and ethno-centric narratives. As such, governments may find it difficult to reconcile ongoing efforts to unify their diverse societies through language, education, historical narratives, and symbols with the need to protect the multiple identities that have historically coexisted there.

While integration policies that seek to achieve a balance between these two imperatives are in some cases being developed, such efforts are often partial and implementation proves to be challenging. We often see the securitization of national minority issues and the favor of approaches that focus on the containment of risks rather than prevention. Unresolved tensions and conflicts, as well as outstanding border demarcation and delimitation issues, further aggravate the tendency to securitize national minority issues. As a result, we see local conflicts sporadically emerging in border areas—namely around enclaves or exclaves, which are often inhabited by national minority communities—over access to land and resources. Concerns about the potential spread of Islamist radicalization, including in connection to conflicts in the Middle East, is another factor contributing to real and perceived security risks.

Geopolitics also play an important role in interethnic relations. Rivalries between regional and global players—be they Russia, the United States, the European Union, Turkey, or Iran—play out to varying degrees in the Silk Road region. Navigating between differing interests and positions, countries may find it difficult to achieve a balance in their respective foreign policy orientations.

In the South Caucasus, for example, while they play a mediation role, regional players also encroach on the latent conflicts in connection to breakaway entities like

Abkhazia, South Ossetia (Tskhinvali) and Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia's proximity and historical ties to Central Asia translate into significant interests, including towards sizable ethnic-Russian communities residing in many countries of the region, in particular in Kazakhstan. China's flagship Belt and Road Initiative, which aims at expanding Beijing's economic and geopolitical clout in the Silk Road region, has led to the acceleration of Chinese investment, along with influence, in some Central Asian countries, but also progressively in the South Caucasus. The proximity with China's problematic Xinjiang region, as well as with war-torn Afghanistan, which hosts significant ethnic Tajik, Turkmen, and Uzbek communities along border areas, also brings to the surface security issues in Central Asia. Similarly, the relative proximity of conflicts in the Middle East raises concerns of potential security spillover to the South Caucasus.

If the interplay of such factors were not complicated enough, the impact of COVID-19 in recent months has added a new challenge to diverse societies in the region and beyond, and constituted an additional dimension to my work as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities at the tail end of my mandate. Emergency measures to prevent and contain the spread of the virus, as well as longer-term policies to minimize the effects of the crisis, had exposed or further accentuated discrimination, shortcomings in governance, and existing structural imbalances in diverse societies.

The economic impact of the crisis, especially on border areas, which are often inhabited by minority communities, has been significant. I had been concerned by several incidents of discrimination against specific social groups accused of spreading the virus, including on social media. Frustration over the impact of COVID-19—and the perception that some governments may have been mismanaging the crisis—coupled with long-standing socio-economic grievances and discrimination against certain groups, had, in some contexts, increased resentment against the authorities and gave rise to protests or instability.

Cognizant of the security risks that this crisis presents, at the onset of the pandemic I issued a set of policy recommendations under the title "Streamlining Diversity: COVID-19 Measures that Support Social Cohesion." This advice, which was based on existing guidance developed by the HCNM in a number of secto-

rial policy areas, called for non-discrimination and inclusivity as the driving principles of any response to the crisis.

By the end of my term, many countries had begun to move out of the emergency phase, with governments beginning to embark on efforts to develop sustainable policy solutions to mitigate the impact of the crisis and build preparedness for future possible relapses of the virus. Finding ways to do that in an inclusive way that builds social cohesion, rather than contributing to fragmentation, will remain a challenge for years to come.

Prevention

The cumulative experience of successive High Commissioners demonstrates the centrality of minority issues to international peace and security. Indeed, present-day crises in the OSCE space often emerge over minority-related issues: legislation that is seen as infringing on rights, attempts by states to grant privileges and protection to "their" minorities residing abroad, and questions related to language, education, citizenship, and historical legacies—just to name a few policy areas on which I regularly engaged with OSCE States.

The experience of successive High Commissioners demonstrates the centrality of minority issues to international peace and security.

However, in my experience, even in instances where minority issues are not the main cause of conflict, how states choose to handle diversity can determine how strong and resilient respective societies are to internal or external threats. This is why policies promoting a balanced management of diversity are a powerful structural and long-term conflict prevention tool, and hence one of the main pillars that had guided my work in the Silk Road region and beyond. There remains an urgent need to build resilient societies in order to protect ourselves from the risks that I have outlined above.

The main reference for this kind of policy support to participating States is a series of Recommendations and Guidelines that successive High Commissioners have developed in a number of specific sectorial areas over the past three decades. Drawing inspiration from international law and norms, these aim to share best practices encountered in OSCE participating States, based on the experience of the successive High Commissioners in their work directly engaging on these issues.

While these documents do not represent a consensual set of principles agreed upon by the participating States, an overall respect for the institution—grounded in the personal accountability of the High Commissioner and designed in cooperation with renowned experts and partners in the field—give these Recommendations and Guidelines authority and the ability to influence policies. I found that this technical and thematic approach was an effective way to address sensitive issues in a non-politicizing way, which had proven to be fundamental in building and maintaining trust—a cornerstone of the mandate of any OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities.

The thematic Recommendations and Guidelines range from an overview of the policies needed to promote the overall processes of integration (or the challenges of looking at national minority issues from the perspective of inter-state relations), to others which address more specific angles, such as education, language, participation, media, policing in multi-ethnic societies, or access to justice.

In practical terms, my team and I often presented contextually relevant thematic Recommendations and Guidelines in our interactions with participating States, and offered advice on how these could be operationalized. In my experience, this thematic approach was exemplified through our programmatic activities. Pilot projects provided practical examples of what can be done in these thematic areas with built-in exit strategies that aimed at local ownership by national authorities and minority groups, sometimes augmented or reinforced with support from donor participating States.

The need to promote, contextualize, and give practical examples of the principles enshrined in the Guidelines and Recommendations guided much of my work in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

Below I present a few examples of how we engaged in the region. These should not be considered in isolation; I had consistently advocated for comprehensive approaches that link policies in different thematic areas, feeling that this represented an effective way to build integration and cohesion. This is why, along with supporting the development of specific sectorial policies, my office invested resources in assisting countries in these regions to develop and implement comprehensive integration strategies, in line with The Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies.

Education

Education is an extremely effective sectorial policy that can promote balanced integration. The Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities advise that education policies should strive to find an appropriate balance between respecting the right of persons belonging to minorities to be taught their culture and (in) their minority language. The idea is to enable them to maintain their identity as well as address the need to create a common educational space with equal opportunities for all to receive quality education.

Many of the states comprising the Silk Road region share a Soviet legacy of segregated minority schools. More recently, however, many countries have increased their respective investments in teaching the state language, which is important to enable national minorities to pursue higher education and, further, a career in their country. This is translating into an overall trend of reduced teaching in and of minority languages, which some see as a threat to minority identities. Education experts have identified multilingual education as an elegant way out of this puzzle, thus ensuring the promotion of state or official language(s) whilst preserving minority languages in the school system. Over the years, successive High Commissioners have refined the OSCE's engagement in several participating States in the sustainable promotion of mother-tongue-based multilingual and multicultural education.

In Central Asia, support has been provided to education authorities' efforts to elaborate legal frameworks and policies for multilingual education; develop methodological materials for teacher training and train teaching staff at pilot schools and preschools; and bring education authorities and practitioners together to foster regional cooperation on multilingual education in regular summer schools and focal point meetings. This unique approach has been embodied in the HCNM Central Asia Education Programme (CAEP), which has become a flagship program of the Institution.

Currently in its third phase, this program operates with in-service training centers on the basis of Memoranda of Co-operation signed with the Ministries of Education and Science of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. It supports mother-tongue-based multilingual education in schools and preschools with Uzbek, Uyghur, and Tajik languages of instruction in Kazakhstan; with Uzbek and Russian languages of instruction in Kyrgyzstan; and with Uzbek language of instruction in some schools in Tajikistan. It provides support at the policy and practitioner levels to uphold the right to mother-tongue education and improve state-language proficiency. The program also produces methodological publications posted on its educational resource website.

This long-term engagement has had a positive impact. The program has supported the creation of a center for Uzbek-language textbook development and publishing in Osh, Kyrgyzstan. The experience of minority schools in Kazakhstan in piloting mother tongue based multilingual education has shown how to implement trilingual education reform (teaching in Kazakh, Russian, and English) in minority schools, while ensuring a continuation of subject teaching in the minority mother tongue.

In Georgia, in the early 2000s we supported state language classes for ethnic Armenians compactly settled in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region. The authorities eventually took over this function via the Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration, providing language classes to civil servants in various minority-populated regions. Inspired by policy dialogues with successive High Commissioners, Georgia also established the 1+4 Program, allowing minority students to improve their state language skills during a preparatory year and then continue with regular bachelor studies at selected universities. This helped motivate minority school graduates to stay on in Georgia for their higher education.

During my tenure as High Commissioner, we accompanied these processes by piloting multilingual education in schools with Armenian and Azerbaijani languages of instruction in the Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions of Georgia, respectively. While there was overall progress in state language acquisition by minority students, several challenges in terms of teacher capacity and resources remain. Recently, efforts were refocused to promote mother tongue-based multilingual education in selected schools and preschool institutions in these two minority-populated areas, also supporting the vision for minority education developed by the Georgian Ministry of Education.

Language

The High Commissioner's approach to language follows the same principles enshrined in the promoted education policies. The Oslo Recommendations regarding the Linguistic Rights of National

Minorities posit that state policies should balance the need for shared language(s) as a common basis for the integration and functioning of diverse societies—with the obligation to safeguard and promote linguistic diversity, including by protecting the linguistic rights of minorities.

This principle recognizes that language is a key component of identity, which, if threatened, can cause instability. At the same time, language, and, in this context, proficiency in the language(s) of the participating State where minorities live, is an essential vehicle towards their participation in the country's economic, social, and public life. This is why it is a vital element of any integration policy.

In the South Caucasus and Central Asia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the *lingua franca* progressively shifted from Russian to the language of the "titular" majority, which in some cases needed to be revived. For national minorities, this often meant having to learn a new language. This was sometimes also accompanied by a reduced attention to the preservation and development of minority languages by countries engaged in nation-building.

There is, therefore, a need to continue promoting the state language as a key tool for integration but within a balanced approach that also safeguards the linguistic and education rights of national minorities. This approach to language had formed the basis of my policy dialogue with relevant authorities in the participating States of Central Asia as well as Georgia.

Participation

The effective participation and representation of persons belonging to national minorities in public life was a main area of focus in my work as High Commissioner, as it is indicative of their level of inclusion and integration in society as a whole. My core message was that minority participation in decisionmaking is an asset that generates substantive gains both for the minorities themselves and the state in question. As such, I approached it not only from a rights-based perspective but also through a conflict-prevention lens.

The effective participation and representation of persons belonging to national minorities in public life was a main area of focus in my work as High Commissioner.

A meaningful level of representation and participation of minorities in all aspects of a country's public life—such as in elected assemblies, executive structures, the public sector, the courts, and the civil service—is vital to foster trust in the institutions of the state. This helps ensure ownership of decisionmaking processes by all members of society, which in turn positively affects social cohesion. I believe a balanced approach to education and language in diverse societies is a prerequisite to and starting point in ensuring participation and representation of all members of society, with respect to their own specific identities.

As mentioned earlier, participation of minorities in public life—as a vehicle towards greater social cohesion—is indeed one of the end goals of the policy advice we provided in these specific fields as well. The principles above are articulated in The Lund Guidelines on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life, which marked its twentieth anniversary last November in Lund, Sweden.

The principles enshrined in the Lund Guidelines were at the heart of my policy dialogues with relevant authorities in the various OSCE participating States. For instance, on several occasions I inquired about the level of representation of persons belonging to national minorities in public services and parliaments and encouraged the collection of disaggregated data to measure progress, while respecting the right to self-identification and privacy. Members of my staff also regularly took part in OSCE/ODIHR election observation missions, including in Central Asian countries and Georgia, to observe and assess the participation of national minorities in election processes.

In Georgia, over the past five years we promoted the political participation of national minorities by bringing them closer to mainstream political parties. Activities included conducting research and writing policy papers; discussing participation at multiparty roundtables where minority representatives engage with party leaders; supporting visits by party representatives to minority regions and visits by minority youth to the capital; engaging expert consultants to help political parties develop agendas for integration; and organizing minority youth internships in mainstream political parties. We also produced a video called Everyone's Voice Matters that highlighted the impact of this internship project on participants.

In the months preceding the conclusion of my term, the COVID-19 pandemic had come to show more starkly the importance of the participation of minority communities in economic life—an area that

had increasingly become a priority for me. Lockdown measures and border closures put a strain on the South Caucasus and Central Asia and particularly affected vulnerable communities, including national minorities. The latter are often disproportionately concentrated in low-skilled labor and the informal economy, or are located in cross-border areas with related economic activities. The absence of prior savings, combined with job losses, a reduction in wages and working hours, limited access to social protection benefits, and a reduction of remittances from abroad, were all shown to be factors that negatively affected already vulnerable communities.

Rule of law

The principles of participation also apply to the judiciary and law-enforcement agencies. Here my guiding document was called the Recommendations on Policing in Multi-ethnic Societies. Therein, the theory was developed that when the police and military are representative of the composition of society and are responsive to the wishes and concerns of all ethnic communities, they have the potential to promote stability within the state and increase the state's legitimacy in the eyes of society, including among minorities.

A police service that is seen to incorporate sections of society that are otherwise excluded or marginalized, as well as one that invests in enhancing communication with all communities, will be more likely to secure the acceptance and cooperation of their members, which tends to lead to sustainability. This not only strengthens interethnic relations, but also increases the operational effectiveness of the police, improves intelligence-led policing and crime reporting, and enhances trust with national minorities.

The same applies to the judiciary. Lack of adequate representation of minority communities in the judiciary diminishes minorities' confidence in the justice system. In addition, factors such as the failure to adequately prosecute crimes that disproportionately affect minority communities, such as hate crimes committed against them by members of the majority, further undermine trust. This also diminishes the deterrent effect of the system. In multi-ethnic societies, the state should promote access to justice for national minorities through positive measures, such as removing disproportionate socio-economic barriers to accessing legal advice. These are some of the key elements of The Graz Recommendations on Access to Justice and National Minorities.

In Georgia, for example, we provided assistance to drafting the Law on Police. We focused on community policing, which has come to be reflected in the curriculum of the Academy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia. In Kyrgyzstan, between 2005 and 2009, we carried out a project promoting multi-ethnic policing in cooperation with the Ministry of Interior. My office later supported the Community Security Initiative (CSI), established in southern Kyrgyzstan following the 2010 Osh events, through activities aimed at enhancing cooperation and trust between law enforcement and minority populations. In Kazakhstan, we launched a capacity-building project on policing in multi ethnic societies and a series of training sessions on the Policing Recommendations for senior and mid-level police officers at the Ministry of Internal Affairs Institute in Aktobe. During my last visit to Kazakhstan in September 2019, my office worked with partners to organize a workshop to present the OSCE's "community policing approach in multi-ethnic societies." Specifically on access to justice, my staff had also hosted roundtables to present the Graz Recommendations in Central Asian countries and Georgia.

Another recurring issue that I observed throughout the OSCE region is the damaging impact of competing and confrontational historical narratives on interethnic relations.

Media

The Guidelines on the Use of Minority Languages in the Broadcast Media and the recent Tallinn Guidelines on National Minorities and the Media in the Digital Age advise that state policies should aim at building the capacity and awareness of the media to reflect and respond to the diversity within societies, including by promoting intercultural exchange and challenging negative stereotypes and ethnicity-based hatred.

We had engaged with public broadcasters in Central Asia and Georgia to advocate for media content in minority languages, which should not only be restricted to folkloric topics, but rather include a range of topics of public interest and reflect minority perspectives as much as possible. For example, we discussed multilingual subtitling and language quotas in broadcasting on television channels in Kazakhstan. We also supported

minority regional television stations in Georgia, as part of wider efforts to support media outlets created by minorities themselves.

As we move further into the digital age, I believe it will be important for media content relevant to minorities also to be represented on new platforms. As the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed, new media can easily become a vehicle for spreading hate speech, which often targets specific groups in society. It is therefore important to invest in shared media spaces that promote social cohesion and contribute to countering discrimination and ethnicity-based hatred.

Historical legacies

Another recurring issue that I observed throughout the OSCE region, including most recently in connection with ongoing anti-racism movements, is the damaging impact of competing and confrontational historical narratives on interethnic relations. The way people understand, remember, and value history is an important factor in the shaping of identity. When approaching the past, one can often observe that people may glorify and commemorate their achievements, victories, and sufferings, while glossing over darker chapters revolving around the tragedies and suffering they may have endured or inflicted on others.

As a result, different groups often attribute different meanings to the same historical events, or simply end up focusing on different events. Disparities in the way people see and remember history can divide societies for decades or even centuries after the events in question had occurred, including along ethnic lines. This is what some call the "mirror of pride and pain," where the pride of one group corresponds to the pain of the other.

All over the Silk Road region, memory and trauma related to the experience of conflict and displacement continue to play a key role in shaping historical narratives, which may pit communities against each other—both within and across borders. Sometimes the object of contention is a statue or a monument, or a toponym; at other times, the curriculum taught at school; or again the so-called "memory laws" through which governments may impose singular historical narratives and prohibit alternative interpretations of the past.

To overcome such issues, I called for inclusive approaches to history and memory that have the ability to unify rather than divide different groups in society. This principle is also enshrined in The Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies, which indicate that "States should take due account of both historical and contemporary community relations. State policies should aim to foster intercultural links and mutual recognition and the accommodation of all groups in society."

A group of historians, experts, and I had been exploring good practices in this field. I was inspired, in part, to focus on this after my visit to Petropavlovsk in northern Kazakhstan, where ethnic Russians make up the majority of the population. I remember being struck by the many concrete examples of powerful symbols of interethnic unity that I found there, such as the Abay-Pushkin monument, dedicated to two of the most prominent Kazakh and Russian poets.

Geopolitical Realities

Many of the countries in the Silk Road region have taken significant strides in the direction of devising integration strategies that contribute to inclusive societies. Challenges remain however, not least to resolve latent conflicts, but also to implement, in a comprehensive way, inclusive policies that support social cohesion. I am proud to have had the opportunity to accompany them on this journey.

The work of the High Commissioner, however, does not take place in a political vacuum and relies upon the continuous support and cooperation of the OSCE participating States. In that sense, the institution's Recommendations and Guidelines are only effective tools for conflict prevention if countries are willing to integrate them into their policies and operationalize them accordingly. The global geopolitical climate sometimes fails to facilitate these processes.

I remain convinced that there is a need to invest more in cooperative platforms as a way to counter trends towards geopolitical polarization. Existing tools for common reflection, dialogue, and concerted preventive action also need to be strengthened. The OSCE can and should remain a primary avenue for such cooperation. BD

Profile in Leadership

Zbigniew Brzezinski (1928-2017)

My Friendship with America's Geopolitical Sage

Hafiz Pashayev

History is never at a stand-still for us in Azerbaijan. Over the past century or so—not to go back further in time—we have witnessed multiple revolutions, coups, and regime changes in our neighborhood; participated in two world wars; and experienced the travesties and tragedies of successive foreign occupations of our lands. The renewal of our independence coincided with the implosion of the Soviet Union—one of the largest empires in human history; the entrenching of American preeminence; the return of China and India as economic powerhouses; and the evolution of the European Community into the European Union.

All these historical trends have been felt in modern Azerbaijan, a country that belongs to an overlapping set of regions and civilizations. We are, in a sense, a quintessential "borderland country," a formulation made famous by prominent historian Tadeusz Swietochowski; but unlike quite a few other borderlands, the political and economic emancipation of today's Azerbaijan has helped to complete the transformation of our country from an object of great power competition—a geography to be won and lost by others—into a strong and independent actor in international affairs: a keystone state imbued with a strong and unified national identity in a part of the world that remains a critical seam of world politics.

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I had a responsibility to advance this national endeavor throughout my tenure as Azerbaijan's inaugural ambassador to the United States (1992-2006)—a period of service to the state that more or less coincided with what has been described as America's unipolar era. It was truly a unique moment in history: the old diplomatic manuals were no longer of much use whilst the new ones had not yet been written. Most thoughtful, seasoned practitioners in America and across the globe were at a loss to predict with confidence the course of events to come. Some celebrated, other mourned; many were hopeful, many more were confused or even frightened.

It is against this backdrop that I came to meet a truly extraordinary individual: one of America's elder statesmen and most renowned geopolitical strategists, Zbigniew Brzezinski (1928-2017). By the time I met him, Zbig (as his friends called him without exception) no longer held any formal position in American government. But his influence had hardly waned. He was, in short, the "American foreign policy sage," as his most prominent biographer called him, alongside, one could say, Henry Kissinger, Brent Scowcroft, James Baker, and perhaps one or two others.

Zbig's career in public service began more than thirty years before we met in Washington, DC: he served as an adviser to the presidential campaigns of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Hubert H. Humphrey. He served on the U.S. State Department's Policy Planning Council from 1966 to 1968. In the early 1970s, he co-founded the Trilateral Commission together with David Rockefeller, serving as its director from 1973 to 1976. He was presidential candidate Jimmy Carter's principal foreign policy adviser in 1976 and went on to serve as President Carter's national security adviser from 1977 to 1981. At various points in his career, he was a member of the faculty of Harvard University, Columbia University, and the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), a division of Johns Hopkins University. When I met him, Zbig was a member of the Board of Trustees and Advisory Board Co-chair of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), arguably Washington's most influential think tank. He was a prolific writer, a sharp policy advocate, and an exceptionally thoughtful geopolitical strategist who authored hundreds of books and essays over his career. His body of work was so large, in fact, that at the time of his death in 2017 there was no complete record of it.

Zbig was also one of the most prominent foreign witnesses and American advocates of Azerbaijan's national achievement—of our reemergence onto what he called the "grand chessboard" of world politics—and our stratagem

to position ourselves in "axial Eurasia" (again, his words) most advantageously within that geopolitical context. He was one of those interesting and powerful people from whom I came to learn a great deal, but also someone who was willing to learn from me and my country's experience and history. Certainly, many of these people became good, lifelong friends; yet Zbig continues to carry a special place in my heart and I deeply miss him these days.

As already mentioned, Zbig and I first met in the early 1990s, when the Soviet Union had just collapsed in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Just like other ambassadors of the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union, I was eager to promote my country's interests within the American political establishment, strengthen bilateral relations, and help secure state sovereignty. Zbig was, of course, quite a sophisticated expert on Russia and on our part of the world—and he was also someone who fully understood the geopolitical importance of supporting the newly independent states. He grasped the tectonic changes that were taking place in the world and possessed the ability to examine emerging trends and consider their likely consequences like few others.

For a grand strategist like Zbig, those were exciting times, indeed. His analyses of the events taking place in our region, together with his speeches and activities, were very helpful to us—both in order to draw attention to our region and to provide a better understanding of American policy.

Above all else, Zbigniew Brzezinski was a great American patriot. In every one of his endeavors, his main priority was always to defend the national interests of the United States and, if at all possible, advance American relations with other countries. He also considered it improper to receive financial or other sorts of contributions from lobbying groups, including those linked to promoting the narrow interests of ethnic minorities residing in his country. His main vision and goal was to do what he thought best for the United States, at both strategic and tactical levels.

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In that context, Zbig was consistently sincere and frank in offering friendly criticism of this or that aspect of American foreign policy-making, including the process whereby particular financial considerations advanced by various groups unduly influenced that process. In our private conversations as well as in public fora, he repeatedly expressed concern that special interests could deleteriously affect American democracy and

American national interests. For instance, this led him to publicly criticize Section 907 (entitled "Restriction on Assistance to Azerbaijan") of the Freedom Support Act (1992) and its ban on any kind of direct U.S. government-to-government aid to Azerbaijan. This section was incorporated into the bill as the result of a successful lobbying effort on the part of ethnic-Armenian organizations and hurt the development of U.S.-Azerbaijan strategic relations.

For such views, he was often disliked by ethnic lobbies. But he didn't care because he always spoke his mind and acted in manner entirely consistent with his understanding of the principles and beliefs that constitute American patriotism.

For example, Zbig famously disagreed with the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq in 2003. When Barack Obama became president, Zbig was very hopeful about him. He thought that Obama, who had been elected with the help of millions of grassroots donations by ordinary Americans, would be able to launch a new era in U.S. politics in which the role of corporate contributions and special-interest lobbying efforts would diminish. He was impressed by this young, dynamic, and promising leader. Yet after a few years I could tell that his expectations had turned into disappointment.

Zbig came to believe that Obama did not fully understand the importance of continuing American leadership in the world, that he failed to put together the right team of foreign policy advisers, and that he lacked interest in the post-Soviet space. Notwithstanding breakthrough agreements with Iran and Cuba, Obama's efforts to reset relations with Russia did not produce good results—and during his presidency, the United States effectively retreated from the Silk Road region, or broader Eurasia as some still call it.

In the person of Zbigniew Brzezinski I had found someone who well understood Azerbaijan's dream for full and secure independence, our strong national desire to protect our sovereignty, and our country's challenges with governance issues. He saw the passion in our people and he helped us to keep that fire alive. "There is a personal sense of satisfaction in having been a witness to your nation's emancipation and to the consolidation of your independence in shaping your national destiny, which is now fully in your hands. For all of you here, it is a time of national renaissance. There is an element of ecstatic emancipation in the sense of having obtained—regained—one's independence. It is now a destiny of

the future—fuller, more hopeful, more fulfilling," Zbig would say in 2003 in Baku, on the occasion of the receipt of an honorary doctoral degree from Baku State University.

Over the course of my ambassadorship and after I returned to Azerbaijan, Zbig and I had many discussions and conversations about the successes and mistakes of the country's young democracy. Notably, he always looked at the larger, more strategic picture rather than criticizing us for one or another sort of concrete political act. He knew well that democratic development is a long process and requires many years of hard work. "In essence, every person knows that these three processes—consolidation of independence, transformation of economy, and democratization of politics—do not happen overnight. They are difficult and slow processes. Some move ahead of others," Zbig said during his Baku State University address.

> *In the person of Zbigniew Brzezinski I had found someone who well understood Azerbaijan's dream for full and secure independence, our strong national desire to protect our sovereignty, and our country's challenges with governance issues.*

In short, Zbigniew Brzezinski knew well that it was critically important for Azerbaijan to preserve its national freedom, and he supported our vision.

Zbig also made concrete contributions to helping my country and our region stand on its own two feet. For instance, it was precisely he who delivered in 1996 an important letter from U.S. President Bill Clinton to President Heydar Aliyev regarding the strategic potential of a new oil pipeline that would carry Caspian oil to world markets whilst bypassing both Russia and Iran. At the time, this proposed pipeline was very much contested by regional powerhouses, with major oil companies also questioning the wisdom of such an investment.

The delivery of Clinton's missive reinforced Heydar Aliyev's confidence to boldly move ahead with this idea. In future meetings and negotiations, our president would make reference to this letter: in many ways, Zbig's special delivery came to be seen as a solid foundation for intense talks that culminated in the landmark Istanbul Declaration in support of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, which was signed on the margins of the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit in the presence of presidents Clinton, Aliyev, Süleyman Demirel of Turkey, Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia, and

Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan. Later, I read somewhere that the American president had said that the series of agreements that made BTC possible constituted one of his administration's "most important foreign policy achievements."

Azerbaijan eventually managed to build what ended up being a lengthy, 1,340 km-long pipeline through Georgia and Turkey thanks to the strategic vision and strong political will of Heydar Aliyev, thus permanently linking Azerbaijan to its Western friends and strategic energy partners. The leadership skills and diplomatic wherewithal required to achieve such a game-changing project were truly of exceptional caliber. My country and our partners will all continue to reap the benefits of this grand endeavor, which for many decades to come will continue to affect the strategic map of the Silk Road region. BTC has gone on to serve as a magnet for other regional connectivity projects, such as the South Caucasus gas pipeline (SCP) and its expansion (SCPX), the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway project. The communities straddling these strategic projects—in fact, the populations of the region as a whole—have gained much in terms of prosperity and development from the moment these began to see the light of day.

Another way Zbig helped Azerbaijan was to provide guidance in helping me and my embassy staff understand how to better position ourselves diplomatically in the American capital. At times, listening to his explanations was akin to attending a private master class in American foreign policy decisionmaking. Zbig repeatedly stressed that the United States was too big to be able to focus on small, individual countries. A successful strategy, he said, would require uniting with likeminded regional allies in order to position ourselves in Washington as a larger grouping. The three Baltic states, he told me in one of our early meetings, were quick to learn this strategy and began acting as one in their lobbying efforts to gain support for acceding to NATO and, later, the European Union. Unfortunately, the three South Caucasus republics, despite early hopes and aspirations, failed to repeat that same strategy and instead got bogged down in regional hostilities. For example, Georgia openly aspired to NATO membership whereas Armenia allied itself with Russia within the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Azerbaijan later tried to create another regional grouping—the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM)—that

brought our country on the same page as Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. This novel regional grouping soon became very popular in those American decisionmaking circles that focused on our region, seeing some potential in this collaboration. When Uzbekistan joined GUAM a few years later, it further increased hopes for deeper cooperation and integration. Most importantly, GUAM helped draw the attention of the American political establishment to this part of the world.

It is hardly coincidental that Zbig's influential book, *The Grand Chessboard* (1997), focuses on three GUAM countries—Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan—and called them linchpins of greater Eurasia: Uzbekistan as a powerhouse and focal center of Central Asia, Azerbaijan as a hub of the South Caucasus and the Caspian region, and Ukraine as an important republic southwest of Russia. "Without Ukraine, Russia can't be an empire," he would famously write.

In short, Brzezinski believed in the potential of the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. He saw their strategic importance and felt that the development and progress of these states might have a positive impact on Russia itself. He was hopeful and optimistic about our region, which helps to explain why he proposed to bring students, academics, and civil society actors from our respective countries, as well as from Russia and others, to the United States to learn more about the American system of governance. He was very supportive of all such people-to-people contacts.

Was he afraid that Azerbaijan and other states in the Silk Road region would lose their independence? Perhaps he was. He was rooting for us and he didn't want us to fail. I remember Zbig's reaction to some negative remarks about Iran made by Abdulfaz Elchibey during the brief period in which he served as president of Azerbaijan (1992-1993). Zbig was quick to say that this was not the right move because troubled relations with Iran is the last thing a war-torn Azerbaijan needed at that particular time (by 1993 Azerbaijan was severely suffering from the occupation, refugee, and IDP crisis, and was being threatened by further Armenian military incursions).

Speaking of IDPs and refugees, Zbig showed genuine compassion and concern about their plight and sorrow. Azerbaijan's humanitarian catastrophe upset him so much that during a 2003 visit to a temporary IDP camp, Zbig refused to join the lavish dinner that the local mayor had unwisely arranged in his honor.

I remember how in planning for that trip, Zbig had asked me to organize a meeting with prominent Azerbaijani intellectuals: poets, painters,

sculptors, and writers. Now I understand why he wanted to speak to that particular group. He wanted to see in their eyes the passion and thirst for freedom and independence. And he saw it indeed: the tea-time discussion lasted almost two and a half hours. "Azerbaijan is a country with profound intellectual potential, great cultural achievements, and a genuinely proud history," Zbig would later say in aforementioned speech at Baku State University.

It is worth to note that Zbig always had in focus the values shared by Azerbaijan and the Euro-Atlantic community, alongside his understanding of where Baku fit in the range of American national interests and broader geopolitical considerations. He certainly felt our two nations shared the values of democracy, freedom, equality, and tolerance.

It is those same shared values to which U.S. President Woodrow Wilson has referred in May 1919 when he met with Alimardan bey Topchubashov, chairman of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic's parliament, during the Paris Peace Conference. This august co-founder of the first secular republic in the Muslim world had impressed the American president so much, that Wilson later remarked, in a speech he delivered in September of that year at San Francisco's Commonwealth Club, that the delegation from Azerbaijan "talked the same language that I did in respect of ideas, in respect of conceptions of liberty, in respect of conceptions of right and justice."

I think this legacy of shared values provided a historical foundation upon which Zbig and I were able to build in order to bring our countries closer to one another in the present.

One particular "project" with Brzezinski rises to my mind with a special joy of memory. In 1997, when we were planning a state visit for Heydar Aliyev to the United States (the first official visit by this grand statesman to the capital of the superpower), I had sought Zbig's advice on how to enrich the program of the agenda. He told me that many American policymakers would surely want to discuss the president's past experience as a non-voting and then full member of the Soviet Politburo (1976-1982, 1982-1987) and First Deputy Prime Minister of the USSR (1982-1987). Zbig then suggested we jointly organize a luncheon in Blair House (the official guesthouse of the President of the United States) with senior American establishment figures, who would surely enjoy conversing with President Aliyev.

The eleven-day visit in 1997 was a chance for Heydar Aliyev to show himself to the American political elite in a new form: as the proud head of state of an independent Azerbaijan who had parted with his Politburo past and

come to selflessly devote his life to the advancement of his nation's interests. Together, Zbig and I developed a list of invited guests to the event, which my friend had kindly agreed to moderate. Amongst those who accepted our co-signed invitations were Richard Armitage, Dick Cheney, Alexander Haig, Anthony Lake, Jessica Matthews, Colin Powell, James Schlesinger, and Brent Scowcroft. It was a fascinating discussion and constituted, in my view, the intellectual highlight of the state visit.

I remember how during the luncheon, one of the American dignitaries had asked the president if the Soviet Union would still have collapsed had he, Heydar Aliyev, been in charge instead of Mikhail Gorbachev. The president replied "no," showing strong confidence in his leadership and managerial capabilities. A few minutes later, he came back to the subject: "it would have collapsed later, because its economic system was not right," he said, adding that he would have managed the collapse in a much more orderly fashion. Such excellent discussions also continued later on in Zbig's own home, where the president had been invited to attend a private dinner as the guest of honor.

During the historic visit, Zbig was also asked by Georgetown University to introduce our president's public lecture at a specially organized public symposium. Instead of offering merely perfunctory or courteous remarks, Zbig seized the opportunity to make a substantive speech on what he called the "most strategically critical country" of the region. He recalled how a senior Clinton administration official had called the South Caucasus a "second grey zone," with Central Europe being considered the first such zone. Zbig interpreted that to mean the following: "a zone of some strategic uncertainty, but a zone in which the United States has to be more actively engaged so that the area ceases to be a gray zone."

I remember him saying in his speech that this "grey zone" terminology—in public he did not name the person who used it—could turn out to be a very significant signal if there was policy follow-through at the top decisionmaking level, because it would mean that America was ready to shift towards thinking about our region in terms of its strategic potential. Zbig went on to say this required deeper American engagement in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, which in turn required his country to exercise "impartiality."

He was aware that the United States had just recently become a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, joining France and Russia. In light of this, Zbig

said America needed to "correct those elements in the American posture which detract from that impartiality"—and that failure to do so would "hurt the promotion of American national interests." This was a clear reference to the aforementioned Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, among other things. Zbig went on to conclude his remarks with his typically scientific way of thinking about foreign policy matters. Resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh issue with enhanced participation by the United States, he said, is "in our interest, as well as in the interest of Azerbaijan. That, in my judgment, is a strategic agenda that we confront in order to advance that strategic relationship. To advance a strategic agenda we have to have genuine geostrategic cooperation with Azerbaijan." Until his passing, I know this remained Zbig's considered view.

The opportunity to observe Heydar Aliyev and Zbigniew Brzezinski up close was a special delight: two great statesmen and grand strategists deep in thoughtful conversation.

The opportunity to observe Heydar Aliyev and Zbigniew Brzezinski up close during the president's 1997 official visit to the United States, as well as in several subsequent meetings, was a special delight: two great statesmen and grand strategists deep in thoughtful conversation. The topics they touched upon included the Soviet Union, Iran, Russia, the Cold War, the future of the region, and indeed the future of the international system.

I remember Zbig sharing with the president his vision for our part of the world: a region of open access, multiple participation, and the involvement of many nations in the development of future prosperity of the Caspian basin and beyond, including Central Asia. Zbig was against the idea of looking into our region from the perspective of Russia, advocating a more balanced policy.

Another time we met, Zbig had with him some words that Heydar Aliyev had recently spoken and proceeded to signal agreement with them:

> I regard Azerbaijan's policy over the last ten years and in the future as independent of anybody's interests. It must be based on observing our own values. [...] We have no specific orientations in foreign policy. Our orientation is based on promoting by means of foreign policy activity the attainment of set objectives, the strengthening of Azerbaijan's place in the world, and also our economic development via mutually advantageous cooperation.

This strategic framework has been further enhanced under President Ilham Aliyev, whom I have heard describe Azerbaijan's approach to foreign relations in the following terms: "we pursue a balanced and independent

policy in the true sense of the word, uninfluenced by any external actor, and based on national interests and justice."

I think Zbig would approve of the clarity and predictability of our foreign policy, of our striving to maintain full reliability with the world's great powers and all our strategic partners, of our emphasis on economic self-empowerment, and of our principled adherence to the diplomatic golden rule of reciprocity. Because of the geopolitical importance he ascribed to our region, I am confident that Zbig would also encourage us to continue demonstrating a willingness to negotiate in good faith on the cardinal issue of liberating our occupied lands whilst endorsing the importance we have placed on verifying the sincerity of the other side's intentions.

But I think most of all Zbig would salute Azerbaijan's grandest achievement on the world stage, which I have already mentioned: namely, the transformation of our country from a mere object—a plaything of others—of international affairs, which had put our very existence in jeopardy in the early 1990s, into a strong, free, equal, proud, and active participant in the international system, which thanks to Ilham Aliyev's leadership is fully capable of charting its own destiny.

Zbig was also willing to help develop bilateral economic ties. Back in 1995, a decision was made to set up the U.S.-Azerbaijan Chamber of Commerce (USACC) in Washington, DC. The aim of this non-profit organization was to help foster economic and business ties between our two countries. Zbig was very supportive of this new and promising initiative and attended our events on several occasions whilst serving on its Board of Trustees. For instance, in 2000 Zbig moderated a USACC gala event in honor of Heydar Aliyev, going on to host in 2007 First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva at a USACC dinner as part of her tour of America in her capacity as Chairwoman of Azerbaijan's parliamentary friendship group with the United States.

Zbig was not only my guide—one could even say my mentor—for understanding American politics; he was also my good friend. One of the highlights of our friendship was the annual New Year's Day brunch he held at his home, and I always felt honored to be included on his carefully curated guestlist. Prominent policymakers and politicians, such as U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, U.S. Senator Richard Lugar, the aforementioned Brent Scowcroft, and others were among those invited. These brunches provided me with invaluable opportunities to promote Azerbaijan and further

put my country on the radar of the American political establishment. Of special value were conversations I had with some of America's most influential journalists and editors who also regularly attended Zbig's New Year's Day brunches. And on a more personal level, I was happy that our families quickly bonded and often exchanged visits to each other's homes in DC.

It had been my dream of many years to return to academia after the completion of my diplomatic service. After my departure from the United States, I was honored to become the founding rector of the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. We all know how Azerbaijan's strengthening economy provided the country with both the need and the resources to open new embassies and diplomatic missions. Although the first years of independence witnessed many ambassadors that came from other fields, such as history, Arab studies, and the hard sciences, the new era and the country's expanding diplomatic administration brought forth the need for a specialized training school. Many people jokingly called Azerbaijan's embassy in DC the country's "original diplomatic academy," because the diplomatic skills of seven or eight future ambassadors were cultivated there during my tenure.

Zbig's encouragement helped us all to transform the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy into ADA University, the country's flagship English-speaking institution of higher learning.

I had used the opportunity of my many meetings with my friend to discuss my plans with him and he very much supported the idea of establishing a full-scale university. Zbig's encouragement helped us all to transform the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy into ADA University, the country's flagship English-speaking institution of higher learning. Early on, I had invited Zbig to join our Board of Trustees, and I was gratified by his kind acceptance. It had been my dream to show him in person how our "green" campus continued to grow, but unfortunately we were never able to schedule another trip for him before he passed away. Although Zbig was not able to see our new facilities, his son Mark visited us in 2017 and together we planted a tree in the center of the campus in my friend's memory.

Zbig very much valued Azerbaijan's focus on development, our investment in education, our economic diversification plans, and the emphasis we put on building up our nation's human potential. He knew well that the future of Azerbaijan greatly depended on such matters and saw how my vision for ADA University fit into that strategy. During his visit to our country

in 2003, he was awarded Honorary Doctorate degree at Azerbaijan's oldest and most reputable university, Baku State University. I only wish we could have done him the same honor at ADA University.

I recall also how I would call on Zbig each time I went back to DC for a visit after my ambassadorial term had come to an end. I somehow felt that on each occasion we were able to resume our wonderful and interesting discussions as if hardly a day had passed since the last conversation. His clear, sharp, and concise arguments continued to mesmerize. I remember one visit coincided with his return from China—a country he had visited regularly since the late 1970s, when as U.S. National Security Adviser he had played a pivotal role in establishing full diplomatic relations between the two countries, building on the foundation laid by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger a few years earlier. Zbig's eyes were full of spark and positive impressions about China's economic progress. He saw something big was coming and he kept talking about China all day long.

China was for him an opportunity more than a threat. Zbig understood there would be increasing policy differences between Washington and Beijing but thought that prudential management of what he felt was turning into the most important bilateral relationship of the twenty-first century could ensure things would not boil over. He had come across some articles that predicted a new cold war was looming on the horizon. I remember him talking about two key differences this possibility held in comparison to the actual Cold War. The first was political: China was not in the least interested in trying to impose its system on the rest of the world, he said. The other was economic: America and the Soviet Union never competed economically and were never interdependent economically. But China, he underscored, was growing in economic stature.

Avoiding a cold war with Beijing, in Zbig's view, was in the American interest: increased tension would make no strategic sense for either side. He also understood that sooner or later China would look west across the steppe towards the Caspian littoral and seize the investment opportunities on offer. He thought it would help balance the Russian influence, but he also felt this could be beneficial for both the region and Russia. At the Georgetown University symposium held during Heydar Aliyev's official visit in 1997, Zbig put it this way: "prosperity and peace in the region can help Russia modernize itself, democratize itself, and Europeanize itself."

I often jokingly referred to Zbig as a "mathematical political scientist," but it had more than a ring of truth to it. Rare among thinkers specializing in any subject, Zbig had what Pascal had termed *esprit de géométrie* as much as *esprit de finesse*. The former impressed me more, to be honest, because of my own academic background. I continue to be struck by his rigorously analytic, almost mathematical, approach to geopolitics to be found in his writings, where he is incredibly precise and to the point without ever failing to understand the big picture.

Some of his best works include the aforementioned *The Grand Chessboard* (1997), which I get the impression introduced him to a whole new generation of readers and admirers—especially in our part of the world, because of all his books it is the one most directly focused on the Silk Road region. Alongside a number of Zbig's other volumes, that one holds pride of place on my bookshelf at home.

I remember how on weekends in Washington I would sometimes go to used bookstores, and I would always look for his earliest books—those that were out of print at the time. One day, I found the one he had co-written with his lifelong friend Samuel Huntington in 1964 called *Political Power: USA/USSR*. It was at once a groundbreaking work of political systems analysis (including examples of institutional decisionmaking in both domestic and foreign policy), geopolitics and grand strategy, and comparative political history. I saw Zbig a few days after finding that book and showed it to him. He held it in his hands and I could tell he was thinking back to the time he wrote it. Zbig leafed through the pages until he got to one part of the book and pointed. Seeing it, he said, reminded him about the argument he and Huntington had made that contrary to the conventional view, collectivization of Soviet agriculture did not facilitate industrialization—a bold and provocative thesis, indeed. He decided to re-read the book, he told me, in order to see whether he still agreed with what he had written three decades ago.

Rare among thinkers specializing in any subject, Zbig had what Pascal had termed esprit de géométrie *as much as* esprit de finesse.

For me, this remains a quintessential Zbig story: he was always thinking and re-thinking his positions and views. He never rested on his laurels. The most important thing was not whether *he* was right, but whether the argument was correct. If that required revising his view, so be it. In other words, he had no problem with admitting he had been in error: he was the

opposite of a stubborn careerist or dogmatic defender of his own legacy; in addition to being a genuine American patriot, Zbig was a true intellectual whose primary locus remained the quest for truth until the end.

Several of Zbig's books are taught in various courses at ADA University and almost all the others can be found in our library. Irrespective of whether they are part of our formal curriculum, all his writings are to be recommended because in them one can see how much respect and dignity Zbig brought to the field of political science, which, I, as a former physicist, still have a hard time calling a real science. In any event, his books are must-reads for even the most advanced students of international relations and a number of other disciples. Learning to appreciate the sophistication and intricacy of his mind has been a lesson in humility for many diplomats and policymakers.

It is a true pity that grand figures such as was Zbig are largely missing these days in the American capital, as can be seen by the fact that the expertise and institutional memory on Russia and other parts of the post-Soviet space is weakening. It is my impression that many think tanks and universities that used to focus on our region are losing their potential and that the United States is shifting its focus away from a strategic region that Zbig called, I repeat, "axial Eurasia." But it should not be forgotten that we are located at the crossroads of many empires and civilizations. Our part of the world has been dominant in world politics for several millennia. There is no reason to think this will not continue—quite the contrary. And I believe the United States needs to stay actively involved throughout the Silk Road region for the sake of its own national interests, no doubt, but also for the purpose of supporting its regional allies—a position I have no doubt Zbig would strongly support today, as he did throughout the more than quarter of a century that we shared in friendship. BD

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Interview

Strategic Equilibrium

Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy

Hikmat Hajiyev

Baku Dialogues:

Good afternoon, Mr. Hajiyev. Thank you for receiving us today. Our intention is for each issue of the re-launched *Baku Dialogues* to feature a conversation with a prominent decisionmaker from what we are calling the Silk Road region—this part of the world that looks west past Anatolia to the warm seas beyond; north across the Caspian towards the Great Plain and the Great Steppe; east to the peaks of the Altai and the arid sands of the Taklamakan; and south towards the Hindu Kush and the Indus valley, looping down around in the direction of the Persian Gulf and across the Fertile Crescent.

And we're honored that you will be the first to be featured in our pages in this way. The editorial premise of *Baku Dialogues* is that one of the few strategic sempiternities in this tumultuous era of change—characterized by centrifugal geopolitical trends hastened by the pandemic—is that this area, this part of the world as we have sketched it out, will maintain its position as a critical seam of international relations, as one of our authors put it.

And what's particularly interesting is that the Silk Road region does not really have a "go-to" geopolitical hub that is an exclusive and integral part of the region. Here the predominant reality is something else: a combination of formal treaties and informal understandings; and there's also some tension, obviously; and frozen conflicts that occasionally flare up into skirmishes—like the one we've seen recently at the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. But as a rule of thumb, no one power dominates, equilibrium is maintained, and a general balance is kept. In other words, the meta-narrative is that the Silk Road region is no longer a mere object of international relations. From this we get to the first question, which is about statecraft. A former ambassador of a great power posted until recently in Baku described Azerbaijan's foreign policy as akin to "strategic balancing on a tightrope." How did Azerbaijan learn to walk the geopolitical tightrope?

***Hikmat Hajiyev** is Assistant to the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Head of the Department of Foreign Policy Affairs of the Presidential Administration of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The interview was conducted in early August 2020 by Fariz Ismailzade and Damjan Krnjević Mišković.*

Hajiyev:

> We all know that today Azerbaijan has good relations with its neighbors—except one, for obvious reasons—and that the country plays a crucial role in the development of the region. The development of mutually beneficial relations with neighbors, based on understanding and respect, is the foreign policy priority of Azerbaijan as defined by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev. The realization of economic projects and the increase of prosperity was the result of the establishment of an atmosphere of partnership, both with regional and other partners. And one can refer to such a successful foreign policy with the academic term "strategic balancing." But we can more properly classify it as an independent and pragmatic foreign policy based on the national interest.
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> It should be emphasized that in our modern history, such a foreign policy was formulated by the National Leader of the Azerbaijani People, Heydar Aliyev, and that this policy is now being effectively continued by President Ilham Aliyev. In taking a deeper look into such a policy, I think we can focus on two aspects: first, the will—the desire—of having partnership relations with neighbors. In order to understand this aspect, we can look deeper into our own society: a society that has an enormous experience of tolerance and a society that operates within an atmosphere—an environment—of multiculturalism. So definitely, these factors have influenced the friendly foreign policy of Azerbaijan.
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> The second aspect is the self-sufficiency of our country. Today we do not need to be on someone's side in order to gain benefits. We just pursue our national interests in the

conduct of our foreign policy and enjoy cooperation with our partners. We believe that only such a friendly and cooperative environment can lead to international economic development and prosperity.

I believe that today, thanks to such a successful foreign policy as practiced by Azerbaijan, our country is a driving force of regional development and a platform for international dialogue.

And even if you will conduct a comparative analysis of the respective foreign policies of the region's countries, I think you will definitely come to the conclusion that the foreign policy of Azerbaijan, based on self-sufficiency and good neighborhood policy, is a formula of success.

Baku Dialogues:

You have defined Azerbaijan's international relations in conceptual terms as the "Four Ms": multi-vectoralism, multi-regionalism, multilateralism, and multiculturalism. Let's go through the Four Ms two at a time, if you agree, starting with multi-vectoralism and multi-regionalism. How do these two terms form the basis of Azerbaijan's external engagement?

Hajiyev:

With regards to the multi-vectoralism—and I have already touched on this in my previous answer—Azerbaijan is keen to build good neighborly relations and ties of cooperation with all its partners. The foreign policy concept of Azerbaijan is not an exclusive but an inclusive one. We are open for all horizons that bring economic prosperity and development to our country. And I think it's fair to say that today, Azerbaijan is not just pursuing multi-vectoral initiatives, but that we have become a regional driving force of such a policy.

With regards to multi-regionalism, Azerbaijan is evidently situated on the crossroads of civilizations. We are the biggest economy in the South Caucasus and are the initiator of several successful projects in this region. But we do not limit ourselves to just this geography. We try to act wider afield. Such a wider perception of our geographic presence and belonging is also an important part of our foreign and economic policy. What I mean is that Azerbaijan tries to serve as a bridge between

different geographies in this part of the world through various political and economic projects.

And nothing could be more natural: Azerbaijan has multiple geopolitical identities. For instance, Azerbaijan is in the South Caucasus and it is also both a Caspian and Black Sea basin country. It is at the same time a far-eastern country of the West. And it is also a Central Asian and CIS country. Our multiple geopolitical identities in a natural way stimulate our multi-regional and multi-vectoral policy. In other words, Azerbaijan cannot confine itself to the boundaries of only one geopolitical framework.

In practical terms, we can mention such multi-regional political formats as, for example, the recent meeting of the presidents of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan. Or let us look at the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) and Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) projects, which are linking together the Caspian, Mediterranean, and Adriatic basins. So today Azerbaijan is bridging several regions, be it in political or economic spheres, and this is our vision of multi-regional connectivity.

Baku Dialogues:

One of these regions, in a political sense, is Europe—or more precisely, the European Union. So let's follow up on that. Last year, President Aliyev expressed pessimism that an agreement would be reached with the EU on a new trade deal by the June 2020 EU Eastern Partnership Summit. And he was right. By and large, the parts of the text that had not been agreed when he expressed pessimism still have not been agreed in the interim. How would you characterize the current negotiations with Brussels in terms of Azerbaijan's future course of relations with the European Union?

Hajiyev:

We have always emphasized that we want to have close cooperation and partnership with the European Union, as the EU is very important, in political and economic terms, at both regional and global levels. As President Aliyev said during the Summit of Eastern Partnership countries, which took place in mid-June 2020 in the format of a video

conference, cooperation with the European Union is one of the main priorities of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. What is important to underline here is that we want to have cooperation as an equal partner. Indeed, the EU has great capabilities and resources, be it in financial, institutional, or other spheres. However, as a fully self-sufficient state Azerbaijan also has assets to offer to the EU, including in the spheres of energy security, transport, security, the fight against illegal migration, trade, and others.

Now, as both sides clearly perceive the nature of their relations as one of equal partners, we are continuing to work on a new bilateral agreement—one that is expected to cover several spheres of cooperation and constitute a legal basis for our relations. The finalization of this agreement is high on the agenda of both sides, and I believe that we can achieve a good result with both sides making an effort.

Today Azerbaijan is the EU's main South Caucasus trade partner. The largest part of the EU's exports to the South Caucasus are destined for Azerbaijan—and vice versa: more than 50 percent of Azerbaijan's exports are directed towards EU markets.

Another important aspect is the security dialogue between Azerbaijan and the EU. Last year we organized a security dialogue here in Baku and discussed such important aspects of cooperation as the fight against terrorism, illegal migration, radicalism, and so on. We are on the forefront of this fight and we believe that there is an enormous area for cooperation between Azerbaijan and the EU in these security dimensions.

Moreover, the EU has a new strategy regarding Central Asia, and Azerbaijan is ready to play a bridging role in building this connectivity between the EU and the Central Asian region. We enjoy good relations with both the EU and Central Asian countries, and we have made it clear that we are willing to offer our capacities to help further link these two regions—both politically and economically.

Baku Dialogues:

President Aliyev has spoken of Azerbaijan's "fraternal" relations with Turkey. He has asserted that he knows of no two other countries in the world that are as close to each other as Turkey and Azerbaijan. Would you say that Turkey is Azerbaijan's closest strategic partner? How is this perceived by your other strategic partners?

Hajiyev:

As I mentioned earlier, Azerbaijan tries to have good relations with all its partners and we are not aiming to differentiate among them. However, relations with Turkey deserve special attention. As National Leader Heydar Aliyev once said: "Azerbaijan and Turkey—one nation, two states." These words spring out of historic ties and a legacy of cooperation between our two countries, and now they set the framework for the future of our bilateral relations.

Today we are fully cooperating with Turkey on both bilateral and multilateral levels. Together we have become stronger and this is our rational choice based on the wills of our peoples and our respective national interests. We provide each other with reciprocal support in various multilateral institutions where we are members, and I can give many examples where Azerbaijan and Turkey fully supported each other in numerous forums. So, the Baku-Ankara relationship is characterized as a strategic partnership—and even further, I would say: our relationship is like one between brothers.

Besides, the partnership between Azerbaijan and Turkey has led to successful regional energy and transportation projects. These have made great contributions to the development and prosperity of the entire region.

I also want to stress that such close relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey are not directed against any other one of our partners. We don't think in terms of how one partnership can harm another; on the contrary, we're in favor of synergies among such partnerships. As a practical example, I can mention several trilateral regional formats involving Azerbaijan, Turkey, and a third country. These have now

become almost institutionalized and thus contribute to regional peace, security, and regional economic development. And we are very glad and proud that Azerbaijan is not just participating in these formats, but is one of their main driving forces.

Baku Dialogues:

We propose to stay for a moment longer in Azerbaijan's immediate neighborhood and ask you about Georgia. In many ways this relationship is a model for bilateral ties across the Silk Road region—especially the way frictions and misunderstandings are managed. What are the takeaways for others in the region in terms of emulating how the Baku-Tbilisi relationship works?

Hajiyev:

I mentioned earlier how Azerbaijan, together with Turkey, is creating regional prosperity through economic projects. Some of these projects are also realized in close partnership with Georgia. Our joint initiatives and projects have already proved to be successful. Besides, we enjoy fruitful historical relations. And on the basis of the fact that we enjoy fruitful cooperation, any issue that comes up between our countries is duly resolved in a brotherly manner.

Today Azerbaijan is one of the main investors in Georgia and our main energy and transportation routes pass through this country. So, our cooperation is essential for regional development and prosperity. I believe our relations with Georgia can be characterized as a model of historic and pragmatic cooperation. Of course, not all are happy from such a model of success, and as a result we see several destructive attempts against it. But as I said, we are very clear on this matter: such attempts can never be successful in the end.

And coming to takeaways for others in the region, I think this is very important matter. Thus, this aspect of your question perfectly fits into our argument about resolving the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. Azerbaijan always states that the resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict will bring not just peace, but also more economic prosperity to the region. And in this regard, the main takeaway with reference

to your question is for Armenia. They must be noticing how regional economic projects are providing better life conditions for the peoples of the participating states—how, for example, Azerbaijanis and Georgians are benefitting from such cooperation in their daily lives. And if Armenia carefully watches this, maybe one day Armenians will understand that their aggressive stance and occupation policy will lead them nowhere, and even further isolate from all regional development initiatives. And of course, this means more political and economic isolation for Armenia, and even further worsening of socio-economic conditions for the population. So, Armenia can easily change this negative tendency by learning from the takeaway of the successful cooperation model between Azerbaijan and Georgia.

Baku Dialogues:

We can come back to the Armenia-Azerbaijan question a little later. But let's turn our focus to big-picture regional issues. One could say that the strategic anchors of the unique set of arrangements that make up the Silk Road region are its "middle powers." And a few months ago you made reference on Twitter to an essay making the case that Azerbaijan is one such middle power, after being considered a failing or even failed state just 30 years ago.

Both the term middle power and the concept traces its origins back to at least Giovanni Botero, a late sixteenth-century political and economic thinker and diplomat, who published his most famous work *The Reason of State* in 1589. In that book, Botero makes a tripartite division between great, middle, and small "dominions" or powers. A middle power, in his telling, has "sufficient force and authority to stand on its own without the need of help from others." And Botero goes on to explain why: leaders of middle powers tend to be acutely aware of the dexterity required to maintain security and project influence in a prudential manner beyond their immediate borders; and because of that, middle powers are apt to have facility in properly managing their finances and promoting trade with their neighbors and their neighbors' neighbors. So we can turn our focus to great power interests, which are not congruent—in the Silk Road region in general and Azerbaijan in particular. You have strong relations with the United States, Russia, and China. They each see themselves as having legitimate interests here, which tend not to be defined in the same way.

Take the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which the United States has increasingly examined—critically—within a geopolitical framework of rivalry with China. It can be said that, regardless of its ultimate success, BRI will inevitably transform the politics and economics of globalization in the twenty-first century—starting with this part of the world. BRI envisions a surge of interdependence across the Silk Road region, and massive investment to improve connectivity. This is an incredibly ambitious vision. Not surprisingly, BRI has been met with excitement, but also concern, in many parts of the world.

How would you qualify Azerbaijan's reception of the BRI concept? How do you see the future of engagement—both nationally and more importantly, regionally—within the framework of BRI? How will this positive—let us call it a sonorous resonation—attitude toward BRI affect the strategic course of relations with Russia and the United States?

Hajiyev:

As you know, Azerbaijan has its own historic role in the context of the ancient Silk Road. By geographic default, you could say, it had influenced our history, culture, architecture, and, of course, our economy. And immediately after regaining our independence we started to project our economy with reference to all that. In other words, the aim was to revive the ancient Silk Road based on new technologies. In practical terms, positioning ourselves as a transportation and energy hub has been a main component of this policy. Among others, I can mention such successful projects as the TRACECA corridor, the BTK railroad, the building of Alat Port, and so on.

So, the Silk Road concept, of course, is not a new concept or a new dimension for us. But certainly, the launch of BRI by China—a country that is quite an influential part of the Silk Road, both in terms of economic and political components—gave a new spirit for the revitalization of the ancient Silk Road. And because of our historical inheritance regarding the Silk Road, we definitely have had a positive perception of BRI; and we feel ready to contribute towards its wider realization. We also enjoy very fruitful political and economic relations with China—this was another impetus for us to join to this initiative.

In our view, BRI is purely an economic project, and as we all know, we now live in an interdependent and economically connected world. So we don't see any antagonism between our possible participation in BRI and our bilateral relations with other important partners. International trade is an important and useful element of our globalized world, where all partners to some extend benefit from its further development.

Baku Dialogues:

Your response helps us get further into the subject of middle powers. Just as a bit of background: scholars like Carsten Holbraad, who wrote an entire manual on middle powers in international relations and drew heavily on the work of Botero, gave additional criteria for a country to achieve middle power status. All of this is certainly familiar to you: some degree of national affluence; the exercise of a moderating or even pacifying influence in the international system, which can even go so far as to positively affect relations between great powers; and actively supporting multilateralism and the work of international organizations. Another scholar, Marijke Breuning, gave a name to that: "norm entrepreneurship." By this she means that middle states, as norm entrepreneurs, "advocate for the adoption of certain international standards and work diplomatically to persuade the representatives of other states to also adopt these norms." So would you recognize Azerbaijan in this definition? Is it prudent for a middle power to formulate its grand strategy on such a basis? In other words, through what sort of conceptual framework does Azerbaijan engage with the world, within the context of the last two of the Four Ms you mentioned earlier—namely multilateralism and multiculturalism—given present geopolitical realities and constraints?

Hajiyev:

We see multilateralism as an essential tool of international relations and in this regard and we highly appreciate the role of the United Nations system, alongside other regional and international organizations. We consider them as platforms for dialogue and cooperation—as institutions providing support and expertise for those who are in need. In this regard, for us, their role in the system of international relations is crucial. I can provide many examples of how Azerbaijan is not just engaged within these organizations, but

also how we actively promote their value among others in the international community.

We are currently chairing the Non-aligned Movement (NAM), which is the second largest international institution in the world—after the UN—with 120 member states. Our aim is to develop even further the NAM platform—the NAM voice—within the UN by playing our part to ensure more coordination and cooperation among its members. As an example, I want to emphasize the successful proposal made by President Aliyev, in his capacity as NAM chair, to convene a special session of the UN General Assembly dedicated to COVID-19, via videoconference. This is good example of how we see the role of multilateral institutions. Why? Well, we believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is a global threat and that we need to unite in the fight against it. And the most appropriate platform for such unity is the UN—the General Assembly has a unique convening power, and it needs to be better utilized. And we are happy that this proposal was widely supported by most of the members of the international community.

Regarding multiculturalism, I want to mention that there are strong traditions of tolerance and multiculturalism in our society: we have inherited these values from our history. And today multiculturalism is a state policy. We are not just exercising these values within our own society, but we are actively trying to promote them on international level as well. For example, I want to mention the Baku Process initiated by President Aliyev in 2008, which later grew into an institutional platform for intercultural dialogue. As you know, every two years Azerbaijan hosts the World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue in partnership with such international organizations as the UN Alliance of Civilizations, UNESCO, and others. So today, in our turbulent world full of hate and extremism, Azerbaijan actively promotes multicultural values.

Furthermore, I want to emphasize the visit of Pope Francis to Azerbaijan in 2016, when he praised the level of tolerance in our country and called Azerbaijan a bridge between cultures. And in February of this year, President Aliyev had a very successful visit to the Vatican where he again met with Pope Francis.

So, the uniting factor of the Four Ms concept is the cognate "multi." Azerbaijan's foreign policy is based on this approach: we want cooperation with different partners, in different regions, and in promoting tolerance among different cultures.

Baku Dialogues:

Educational opportunities could be construed to be also a part of the "norm entrepreneurship" practiced by middle powers. After all, Azerbaijan has been providing students from member-states of the Turkic Council and the Non-aligned Movement with generous scholarships for studies in higher educational institutions in the country. Some of these students have chosen to study at ADA University, the institutional host of *Baku Dialogues*. Welcoming students from abroad is part of the university's strategic vision to become a world-class university in this country by 2025. What stands at the heart of Azerbaijan's commitment to promote educational opportunities for students from abroad? How does this benefit not just Azerbaijan, but the entire Silk Road region?

Hajiyev:

We all know that quality education is a core driver for the development of any society. This is why education is high on Azerbaijan's agenda. And today Azerbaijan has become a strong member of the international community, with its own great experiences to share. So our country does not just focus on itself—we do not just look inward—but we also offer opportunities to other members of the international community. We are glad that our country has become a destination for foreign students and I am strongly convinced that here they can gain not just academic knowledge, which is at a very high level, but also benefit from our rich tradition of tolerance and multiculturalism.

You know, we are receiving several students from the countries of Silk Road region. And I find that quite symbolic. The Silk Road is not just about trade, transportation, and the economy; it is also about other forms of connectivity like cultural exchanges, sharing experiences, learning from each other, and education. So the presence of foreign students from Silk Road region countries here in Azerbaijan demonstrates

the role of Azerbaijan in the Silk Road region as a whole, and it shows how the Silk Road is again becoming a living organism through the sharing of cultures, education, and experiences.

Baku Dialogues:

We've already addressed the Belt and Road Initiative—the contemporary Silk Road and the region that forms its core, which as you've noted places pride of place to connectivity. But Azerbaijan's emphasis on connectivity predates BRI. Azerbaijan has gone from being a "land-locked country to a land-linked country," as you've said. Can you therefore share with us the conceptual framework behind this logic? What is Azerbaijan's comparative advantage? And if you could, leave the hydrocarbon aspect of it aside, for the moment. We will come to that in the next question.

Hajiyev:

As I have already said, Azerbaijan is located on the crossroads of continents. This is a geopolitically complex region, but also a region of opportunities. With a successful economic and foreign policy, Azerbaijan can reap the benefits of its location. Yes, we don't have access to open seas and in geographical terms we are land-locked country. But we have been able to become a transport-logistic hub, which is a crucial element in modern international economics. Two important transport corridors pass through Azerbaijan: the east-west and the north-south transversals. And of course we're also part of the Silk Road—of the Belt and Road Initiative—as I already mentioned.

But one should consider that such a situation—of us moving beyond the traditional confinements of being land-locked—cannot be perceived as a given. Rather, this is a result of the successful economic and foreign policy of the President of Azerbaijan. Tremendous efforts and lots of resources were allocated for this to become a reality. To name a few achievements in the economic and infrastructure fields: building highways, our international port, development of air carrier infrastructure, and so on. And of course, I need to come back to something I said earlier: all of this is integral to the policy of building cooperation with our foreign partners.

So today we contribute to international trade and the broader economy as a main hub in this region. Virtually no regional economic projects are being implemented without the participation of Azerbaijan. This means that we have been able to transform our geographic reality of being a land-locked country into our economic success—into our economic reality of having become a land-linked country.

Baku Dialogues:

Let's next turn to energy. Along with geography, which you have just discussed, Azerbaijan's other natural strategic advantage is hydrocarbon resources. One could say it forms the basis for everything else: it's the cornerstone of prosperity. But hydrocarbons can often be a curse, not just in the sense that they can destroy a country's economy if the resource is mismanaged, but also in the sense that their presence sometimes attracts undue and competing attention from great powers and ambitious aspirants. Azerbaijan has been able to avoid both of these dangers: the economic and the geopolitical. It is a reliable producing country and a reliable transit country. But it is more than that, as well. Befitting its middle power status, it continues to be a norm entrepreneur in the field of energy security and energy cooperation. Could you briefly outline the regional challenges Azerbaijan had to overcome and your vision of the future in the context of energy connectivity?

Hajiyev:

Energy projects continue to have an essential role to play within our economy. But we have to see not just the economic but also the political importance of these projects. In the early period of our independence, Azerbaijan faced a major threat in the form of foreign occupation. And of course, this was a major challenge which we had to contain. And secondly, not all regional states were supportive of these energy projects, as there were several other views and interests in this regard. And in such a complex geopolitical situation, our National Leader Heydar Aliyev successfully concluded the Contract of the Century with major international oil companies. And in the end this contract became the reason—the catalyst, even—of regional cooperation and development.

With regards to the future, I have to say that even though the world's hydrocarbon players are now investing in renewable energy resources, still, for the moment, fossil fuels are maintaining their tangible share in the world's modern energy system. And the world is becoming even more interconnected in terms of economy. So, energy connectivity is still actual and important, and Azerbaijan is happy to have its own tangible role in this process. Today we are not just exporting oil and gas, but we are also becoming a transit hub for other exporters. We have developed all the necessary infrastructure, which gives us an asset in negotiations with our partners on various energy transportation projects.

Baku Dialogues:

Remaining on questions having to do with energy. Let's go back to the beginning—to the Contract of the Century, which you've mentioned. We could say that it points to the diplomatic artistry at the heart of Azerbaijan's energy policy. Heydar Aliyev came back to Baku and was elected chairman of Azerbaijan's parliament in June 1993, and a few days later assumed the function of president. In October 1993, he was elected president. This could be said to be the moment in which he consolidated power. And less than a year later—in September 1994—the Contract of the Century was signed. Again, you alluded to this in your previous answer. The internal circumstances were dire and the geopolitical vultures, one could say, were circling. He had to tread extremely carefully on the energy question. And he succeeded: he found a way to accommodate all stakeholders. To attract the West through partnership and without alienating Moscow—actually by incorporating Russian interests into the deal. This approach, with requires constant fine-tuning and a combination of prudential judgment and strategic foresight, continues to form the basis of Azerbaijan's energy policy. On the other hand, geopolitical circumstances have changed. At the very beginning of our discussion, we referred to centrifugal geopolitical trends quickened by the pandemic. With this in mind, can you lay out for us how Azerbaijan has been able to maintain its strategic energy posture, vis-à-vis the great powers in particular, in these challenging geopolitical times?

Hajiyev:

First of all, the historic role of Heydar Aliyev should be emphasized, as you have done in your question. Thanks to his vision and foreign policy concept we were able to convince

the main international oil companies to invest in Azerbaijan. Establishing stability within the country and building partnership relations with regional countries—these were two of the main conditions for Azerbaijan to be able to attract strategic levels of foreign investment. And this all was successfully realized at that time. Azerbaijan was able to demonstrate that our energy projects will bring development and prosperity to our region, and that all participating sides will benefit from such cooperation. And of course, today we see the fruitful results of these projects.

Baku Dialogues:

We have discussed one dimension of security—namely energy. There are two more to go. Let's start with hard security. Azerbaijan is institutionally affiliated with NATO through Partnership for Peace, which it joined in May 1994. Less than a year earlier, in September 1993, it joined the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and then in 1999 a decision was taken not to renew membership in the CSTO. So for a period of time, Azerbaijan was exclusively PfP-oriented. It modernized its military, deepened overall defense cooperation with NATO, participated in NATO forward deployments in places like Afghanistan, and so on. Then, in March 2016 Azerbaijan became a Dialogue Partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. But all in all, Azerbaijan seems to enjoy a much deeper level of engagement and cooperation in the security field with the Atlantic Alliance than with its alternatives. So the question can be formulated in the following manner: what lies behind Azerbaijan's strategic decision, which was made in 1994 and has been consistently maintained ever since, to favor security cooperation with the West?

Hajiyev:

The reason Azerbaijan has a partnership with NATO is very simple. NATO is a strong regional political-military block with its own capabilities and institutional military experience. After gaining independence, Azerbaijan pursued a policy of building good relations with all international partners, and NATO was one of them. We were keen to benefit from NATO's military experience in building up our own national army and developing our own military capabilities. And the Partnership for Peace was an existing instrument that was offered by NATO.

So, bearing this in mind, we joined this instrument. Today we enjoy excellent relations with NATO; and sharing experiences is one of the core components of this cooperation. And of course, building partnership with NATO as an institution definitely contributed to the positive relations which we are having with our Western partners.

Baku Dialogues:

We now turn to the third and most fundamental aspect of security for Azerbaijan—its number one national security threat. And because this is the core issue, we have chosen to reserve a consideration of the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh and other occupied territories for the very end of our conversation—although you made reference to it earlier. We want to give you the opportunity to state the official position of Azerbaijan on this fundamental question not just for this country but in the context of the legitimacy of the principles upon which stands the international system as a whole. And then we can discuss further.

Hajiyev:

The position of Azerbaijan on this issue is very clear and was mentioned on several occasions by President Aliyev. This conflict should be resolved within the territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan, based on the norms and principles of international law, the four relevant UN Security Council resolutions, the Helsinki Final Act, and of course, the Constitution and laws of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The Security Council resolutions demand the unconditional and full withdrawal of Armenian troops from all occupied territories of Azerbaijan. Also, the Security Council resolutions condemn the occupation of Azerbaijan's lands through the use of force and underline the inadmissibility of gaining territory by the use of force. Thus, for the resolution of the conflict, the armed forces of Armenia should be withdrawn from the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan and the seven surrounding regions, and there should be a condition for Azerbaijani IDPs to return to their homes in dignity and security. So, Nagorno-Karabakh is and will be as an integral part of Azerbaijan. As President Aliyev has said: "Nagorno-Karabakh is Azerbaijan, and exclamation mark."

Baku Dialogues:

Next, we'd like to ask you to address the recent escalation of tensions along the Azerbaijan-Armenia state border, which centers on an area several hundred kilometers north of the line of contact. Azerbaijan says Armenia started it, Armenia says Azerbaijan started it. And of course this took place in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. So what are your thoughts on this? In your view, what were the reasons this happened?

Hajiyev:

Let me start with the reasons. This was a new and well-prepared act of aggression by Armenia against Azerbaijan. This act is a logical continuation of the statement of the Armenian defense minister regarding a "new war for new territories." The reasons are linked to both the domestic and foreign policy of Armenia. First, through such acts Armenia is trying to distract the attention of its population from the country's existing socio-economic problems. In addition, due to the government's mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic, Armenia is experiencing huge challenges in that regard.

Secondly, the location of these deliberate attacks were not accidental. Thus by launching an attack on the state border with Azerbaijan, Armenia tried to do four things. One, involve third parties in the conflict, namely the Collective Security Treaty Organization. However, this was both a failure and miscalculation. The CSTO did not support Armenia, for the simple reason that Azerbaijan enjoys fruitful relations with all its members, except Armenia. Two, distract the international community's attention from Armenia's occupation of nearly 20 percent of the territories of Azerbaijan. Three, target Azerbaijan's critical infrastructure, including oil and gas pipelines. Four, cast a shadow over the successful initiative of the President of Azerbaijan concerning the UN General Assembly's special session on COVID-19, which I have already mentioned.

The Armed Forces of Azerbaijan responded effectively and the attack was repulsed; Armenia achieved none of the aims. Unfortunately—because of this act of aggression—twelve Azerbaijani servicemen were killed. It should also be

emphasized that Armenia deliberately attacked the civilians living alongside the state border, using heavy artillery. As a result, one civilian died and some civilian infrastructure was heavily damaged. This is a clear violation of international humanitarian law, including the relevant Geneva Conventions.

Of course, as always, Armenia tried to blame Azerbaijan for these events. This is nonsense. Azerbaijan deploys the State Border Service along the dominant part of the state border with Armenia. This clearly demonstrates that Azerbaijan has no interest in escalation at that destination.

This was another destructive attempt to mislead both internal and external audiences. Again, to repeat: the result was failure. Armenia has to understand that sooner or later Azerbaijan will restore its territorial integrity. The political-military leadership of Armenia needs courage to accept this fact and act accordingly.

Finally, I want to touch upon the issue of the global struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic, in the context of Armenia's recent act of aggression. As you know, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres declared a global ceasefire for the world to be able to better concentrate on the fight against the pandemic. Armenia joined this initiative and widely publicized its decision. A little bit later, they started this deliberate act of aggression. This is nothing but hypocrisy. It is important that the international community reacts to such behavior in a very clear manner.

Baku Dialogues:

But let us take a step back. Azerbaijan lives in "conditions of war," as President Aliyev has reminded audiences for a number of years. So yes: there is a general ceasefire, there is a line of contact, and there is a peace process. But peace remains elusive after more than 25 years of mediation and direct talks: the war has not come to an end. The stalemate is cementing. The one million refugees and IDPs have not returned home. The reality of the occupation has not changed. The status quo—the frozen conflict—favors Yerevan: its continues to hold what Baku claims by recourse to law is its own—a position, as you have outlined, that is

consistent with a plain reading of the relevant Security Council resolutions and OSCE core documents.

There seem to be two ways to resolve the issue. One is military and the other concessionary. But the military approach is not something anyone wishes, so let us leave that discussion for another time. The second is concessionary. What Azerbaijan has been offering is evidently not enough for Armenia to yield. And those who have a mandate to mediate so far appear unwilling or unable to trigger the implementation of a phased approach on that or any other basis. Otherwise there would be no ongoing stalemate.

Perhaps it could be helpful to ask you to paint us a strategic picture of Azerbaijan's vision for peace. Before you take up your answer, we would ask you to please consider what Heydar Aliyev said on the day the Contract of the Century was signed: "I want to say frankly, not all our desires have found their expression in the contract, but we understand that any contract must satisfy the interests of both sides." The question is this: what is the concessionary basis for peace—and it seems that both sides will need to make difficult concessions, and both sides are constrained by their respective narratives; so, again, what is the concessionary basis for achieving a breakthrough?

Hajiyev:

Concessions are important elements of conflict resolution, but of course within certain reasonable frameworks. In our case we have to make it clear that the territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan cannot be questioned in any circumstances. It is not a matter of discussion or negotiation. The basis for a resolution of the conflict is the restoration of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. As I mentioned earlier, the armed forces of Armenia should withdraw and IDPs must return to their homelands. The basis for such arguments lies both within historical reality and international law. So, from both historic and legal perspectives, this is the only founding ground for the resolution of the conflict.

Unfortunately, today we witness illegal activities realized by Armenia in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan. In this regard, I want to specially emphasize the policy of illegal settlement, illegal extraction of mineral resources and their

delivery to black markets, money laundering, and the promotion of illegal visits of foreigners to these territories. All these facts clearly demonstrate that Armenia is not sincere in the negotiation process and is not interested in achieving a resolution of this conflict at all. The current leadership of Armenia tries to undermine both the substance and format of the negotiations.

The fact that Azerbaijan is still continuing to participate in this process of negotiations—what we call a policy of strategic patience—is already a great concession from our side. Because for the moment, doing so is our rational choice, derived from all the possible means enabling us to restore our territorial integrity.

Azerbaijan is very clear in its position that we are ready to accommodate peacefully the Armenian inhabitants of the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. We see them as our citizens and we believe that Azerbaijanis and Armenians of the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan will be able to live together in peace. But of course, as I said earlier, first of all the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan should be restored. Today we live in the twenty-first century and changing internationally-recognized borders by force is totally inadmissible in our civilized world. The situation resulting from such an occupation cannot be imposed as a reality. The status quo of occupation must end.

Azerbaijan retains all its rights to liberate its territories from occupation under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. The responsibility for such development completely lies on the shoulders of the leadership of Armenia.

Baku Dialogues:

Thank you, Mr. Hajiyev, for the interview. BD

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